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PRESERVING MR. PANMURE

• *A COMIC PLAY*
• *In Four Acts*

By ARTHUR W. PINERO

LONDON : WILLIAM HEINEMANN

MCMXII

1912

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*This play was produced in
London, at the Comedy Theatre,
on Thursday, January 19,
1911; and in New York, at
the Lyceum Theatre, on
Tuesday, February 27, 1912.*

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

THE RIGHT HON. REGINALD STULKELEY, M.P.

TALBOT WOODHOUSE (*His private secretary*)

ST. JOHN PANMURE, J.P.

ALFRED HEBBLETHWAITE, M.P.

HUGH LORING

BRABNER } (*Butler and footman at "The Clewers"*)
KITTS }

GRANT (*Servant at Mr. Stulkeley's*)

MRS. PANMURE

MYRTLE (*Her daughter*)

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE (*Mrs. Panmure's aunt*)

DULCIE ANSTICE (*Mrs. Panmure's sister*)

MISS STULKELEY

JOSEPHA QUARENDON

The scene is laid first at "The Clewers," Tollshunt d'Arcy, near Polehampton, and afterwards at Mr. Stulkeley's house in London.

The curtain will be lowered for a moment in the course of the Second Act.

**All applications respecting the performances of
this play by Amateur Dramatic Societies must
be made to the Author's Agents, Samuel French
Ltd., 26 Southampton Street, Strand, W.C.**

PRESERVING MR. PANMURE

THE FIRST ACT

The scene is the inner hall of a house in the country. The walls are panelled, the back wall elbow-high in wood, the rest of it in glass. In the centre of this wall is a double-door, also glazed. From about seven feet from the ground, a silk hanging covers the glazed panels of the back wall and of the door; and above the hanging there is a view of a broad corridor, of a door in the wall on the further side of the corridor, and of two staircases—one on the right, the other on the left—ascending to the upper floors.

In the wall on the left is the fireplace, and between the fireplace and the back wall there is a single door opening from an adjoining room. In the right-hand wall, opposite the fireplace, is a bay-window over which the curtains are drawn. A writing-table and chair stand in the bay, and beyond the recess are a handsome chamber-organ, a music-stool and, near-by, a brass lectern. Also on the right are a round table, a settee facing the fireplace, and two chairs.

On the left, by the fireplace, a second settee fronts the spectator. Behind this settee are a small table

PRESERVING MR. PANMURE

and a chair ; on the right of it, an arm-chair and a fauteuil-stool. Another arm-chair stands close to the fireplace, at the nearer side ; and against the back wall, between the door in the centre and the wall on the left, is a third settee.

The corridor is lighted by a large pendent lamp. Except for the light coming from this lamp, and for the flicker of the fire, the room is in darkness.

[*Note : Throughout, "right" and "left" are the spectators' right and left, not the actor's.*]

[*MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE and DULCIE ANSTICE are seated by the fire, MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE upon the settee, DULCIE in the arm-chair between the settee and the fauteuil-stool. They are dozing. Presently DULCIE rouses herself, yawns violently, and rises. Wandering to the window, she separates the curtains and peeps out.*

DULCIE.

[*A handsome, modish young lady of thirty-two.*]
Ugh!

[*MRS. PANMURE enters at the door on the left, carrying some letters. She is a gentle, sweet-looking woman, a few years older than DULCIE.*

MRS. PANMURE.

In the dark!

[*She switches on the light.*

DULCIE.

[*Leaving the window.*] Snowing.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Troubled.*] Yes, and Josey Quarendon is out with Myrtle.

DULCIE.

[*Witheringly.*] She *would* be.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Moving to the fireplace.*] I'll order tea. [*Ring-
ing.*] The men ought to be back by five. [*To MRS. HEBBLE-
THWAITE, who has opened her eyes and is trying to look
wise.*] Have I disturbed you, auntie?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*A portly, pleasant lady of fifty.*] Disturbed me,
dear? Not in the least.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To DULCIE.*] Has Hugh arrived yet?

DULCIE.

Hugh? He's not due till dinner, is he?

MRS. PANMURE.

I asked him to come early and dress here. I
thought you'd be glad of a quiet hour or two
together.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

I've just been telling Dulcie how delighted I am
with Mr. Loring.

MRS. PANMURE.

We are all full of thanks over the affair.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Absolutely simple and amiable, if I'm any judge of character !

DULCIE.

Dear old Hughie ! When I've enlarged his mental outlook and polished him up generally——

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Mildly.*] Dulcie ! [BRABNER, *an elderly manservant, enters at the door in the centre.* MRS. PANMURE *goes to him and gives him her letters.*] For the post.

BRABNER.

Yes, m'm.

MRS. PANMURE.

And you may bring tea in a quarter-of-an-hour.

BRABNER.

Very good, m'm.

MRS. PANMURE.

Oh—Brabner——

BRABNER.

Yes, m'm ?

MRS. PANMURE.

This new young man—Kitts——

BRABNER.

Albert Kitts, m'm—quite a nice, capable lad.

MRS. PANMURE.

I'm sure of it. But—Brabner——

BRABNER.

Yes, m'm?

MRS. PANMURE.

He was absent from prayers this morning.

DULCIE.

[*Sitting upon the settee on the right—groaning inwardly.*] Oh!

BRABNER.

[*Surprised.*] Kitts was, m'm!

MRS. PANMURE.

Brabner!

BRABNER.

[*Coughing behind his hand.*] Heugh, heugh! Yes, m'm, I'm aware.

MRS. PANMURE.

That won't do, Brabner.

BRABNER.

No, m'm, that won't do for *us*.

MRS. PANMURE.

Weren't the rules of the house explained to him?

BRABNER.

By me *and* Mrs. Meadows, m'm—till we was 'oarse, as you might say.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Pityingly.*] Poor fellow! I leave him to you, Brabner.

BRABNER.

I'll have him in to-night, m'm, if it's by the scruff of his neck.

MRS. PANMURE.

That won't be necessary, Brabner, I *hope*.

BRABNER.

In these demycratic days, m'm——!

MRS. PANMURE.

The only true equality, Brabner, is when we are on our knees. [*Dismissing him.*] Tea at five.

BRABNER.

Yes, m'm.

[*He withdraws.*]

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Looking at her fingers.*] My hands are steeped in ink. No, no, I mustn't exaggerate; I've slightly inked my middle finger.

[*She goes out at the door in the centre and ascends the stairs.*]

DULCIE.

[*Reclining upon the settee on the right.*] Oh, lord, Lottie's too good for this world!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Rising.*] If there were more like her——!

DULCIE.

If there were *many* more like her, the stock of halos would give out. She's worse than ever.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

You mean better. She has always been devoutly inclined, dear child.

DULCIE.

In a reasonable, moderate way. But now—! Ouf! Sometimes I anathematize the day I came to live with Lottie and St. John.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

It has got you a husband, at any rate.

DULCIE.

Yes, and the only decent catch in the neighbourhood; I'm not oblivious of that. [*Thumping a pillow.*] Oh, but we're so pious here!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Advancing to* DULCIE.] You'll soon be out of it.

DULCIE.

I'm not to be married till June. Five more mortal months! [*Settling herself.*] It's all this Mr. Pruyne's doing, you know—the life we've been leading at The Clewers lately.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Sitting at the round table.*] The new rector of Polchampton.

DULCIE.

The man who dined with us last night.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Strongly resembling a raven.

DULCIE.

The Reverend Mervyn Pruyn. My sister is completely at his feet.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

I confess I should never have thought that Lottie would have deserted her own little church at Tollshunt.

DULCIE.

Poor Mr. Crispe is beating his venerable brow over it. [*Raising herself upon her elbow to face Mrs. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Aunt——

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Yes, dear ?

DULCIE.

Have you heard of the Guild of Fine Souls ?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Guild of—what ?

DULCIE.

Fine Souls.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Good gracious !

DULCIE.

It's a sort of Order that Pruyn has instituted for pure people. Pruyn's Pure People ! Suggests pink pills, doesn't it ?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Reprovingly.*] Dulcie!

DULCIE.

Lottie is the first to be admitted.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Quite right.

DULCIE.

Didn't you spot the ornament she was wearing in her dress last night?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Oh, I wondered——

DULCIE.

That was *it*—the badge. The design is a pair of wings sprouting out of a heart.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Rather a pretty idea.

DULCIE.

There are three grades—first, second, and third class. The first gets a gilt badge, the second a silver one, the third copper. [*Pointing a warning finger at Mrs. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] You take jolly good care you're not nominated during your stay here.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Nominated?

DULCIE.

By Lottie. The holder of a First Class badge has the privilege of nominating three Fine Souls for the Guild. [*Putting her feet to the ground.*] However, there's one consolation.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Consolation ?

DULCIE.

[*Tidying her hair.*] I'm in no danger.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Dulcie, for shame !

DULCIE.

[*Listening.*] Sssh ! [*Dropping her voice.*] Don't you chaff her about it, though.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Chaff her ! As if—— !

[*MRS. PANMURE has descended the stairs and now re-enters at the door in the centre.*]

MRS. PANMURE.

What are you two talking about ?

DULCIE.

Er—[*rising and going to the fireplace*] the new organ.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Standing before the organ in admiration.*] Ah ! Isn't it beautiful, auntie ?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Rising and joining* MRS. PANMURE.] Beautiful.

MRS. PANMURE.

A great improvement on the old harmonium.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

And how capitably that young woman of yours plays it.

MRS. PANMURE.

Caroline—my maid.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

So versatile of her !

MRS. PANMURE.

She hasn't been with me long. She came *with* the organ, as it were.

DULCIE.

She's a rotten maid.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Pained.*] Dulcie !

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Soothingly.*] Well, you can't have it all ways, can you ?

MRS. PANMURE.

No, it's such a rare combination—a maid *and* an organist.

DULCIE.

Oh, I admit, when she gets her fingers into your hair, you know she's a good organist.

[JOSEPHA QUARENDON *enters breathlessly at the door in the centre, pushing MYRTLE before her. They are in outdoor things, which are powdered with snow. MYRTLE is so enveloped in mufflers and wraps as to be almost entirely concealed.*

JOSEPHA.

[*A captivating, light-hearted young lady of seven-and-twenty.*] Awfully sorry! Have you been anxious about us?

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Hurrying to MYRTLE.*] Oh, my darling! [*Going down on her knees to remove MYRTLE's outer coverings.*] My darling, where are you?

MYRTLE.

[*In a distant voice.*] I am here, mother.

JOSEPHA.

[*Taking MYRTLE's things, one by one, from Mrs. PANMURE.*] We went a bit further than I intended.

MRS. PANMURE.

How could you, Josey?

JOSEPHA.

It's glorious out of doors.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*As MYRTLE is gradually revealed.*] Oh—oh—
oh——

MYRTLE.

[*A wizen, owlsh child of eleven, with a prominent brow and two skimp plaits hanging down her back.*] I beg that nobody will make a fuss. It's as much my fault as Josepha's.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

The child's nose is as red as a beetroot. Look at your nose, Myrtle.

MRS. PANMURE.

Ah, yes, look at your nose!

DULCIE.

Myrtle, do look at your nose.

MYRTLE.

[*Squinting horribly.*] How can I? [*With dignity.*] Surely it must be evident to you all that you are demanding an impossibility.

JOSEPHA.

[*Burdened with MYRTLE's wraps, etc.*] I'll take her upstairs.

MRS. PANMURE.

And change her boots.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

And stockings.

JOSEPHA.

And the colour of her nose. [*Merrily.*] Come along,
Myr. Ha, ha, ha!

[*JOSEPHA and MYRTLE go out at the door in the
centre and mount the stairs.*]

DULCIE.

[*After a pause.*] It will never answer; never, never,
never.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Gloomily.*] I have grave doubts on the point,
certainly.

MRS. PANMURE.

But, aunt Corisande, *can't* a mother make her
child's governess a friend?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

That's precisely what you haven't done, dear.

DULCIE.

What *you've* done, Lottie, is to make a friend your
child's governess.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To MRS. PANMURE.*] She was at school with you,
wasn't she?

MRS. PANMURE.

At Madame Vignolles', in my last two terms. She
was the baby of the school when I was senior.

DULCIE.

[*Incredulously.*] Oh, Lottie!

MRS. PANMURE.

She's only twenty-seven.

DULCIE.

[*Humming.*] H'm, h'm, h'm!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Sitting upon the settee on the right.*] Who is she?

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Sitting, facing MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE, upon the fauteuil-stool.*] Her father was Colonel Quarendon; he was something in the War Office. Our guest—Mr. Stulkeley—knew him, and speaks highly of him.

DULCIE.

[*Sitting on the settee by the fireplace.*] Of the father.

MRS. PANMURE.

Mrs. Quarendon was a Walmsley.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

There are any number of Walmsleys.

MRS. PANMURE.

She died years ago, the Colonel the year before last.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

No money?

MRS. PANMURE.

Not a penny.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Sad, of course.

MRS. PANMURE.

Josey's had a dreadfully rough time of it. I believe she has known what it is to dine upon an egg.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Benevolently.*] Well, my dear, if it was a *fresh* egg——

MRS. PANMURE.

Auntie!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Her *frocks* don't give one the notion of poverty.

MRS. PANMURE.

They made up a purse for her in London, when it was settled she should come down to me.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Who were "they"?

MRS. PANMURE.

Some friends of her father's.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Men friends?

MRS. PANMURE.

I haven't inquired. Anyhow, the figure wasn't a very large one.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Startled.*] Her figure?

MRS. PANMURE.

No, no; the amount subscribed.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

I thought you were referring to her measurements.

DULCIE.

[*Amused.*] Ha, ha!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Then, again, there is the question of Myrtle's education. Is this young person qualified to undertake it?

MRS. PANMURE.

She's exceedingly clever.

DULCIE.

As clever as she can stick.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Cleverness and the capacity for instructing are different matters.

MRS. PANMURE.

Dr. Beaumont says that Myrtle's intellectual development is so extraordinary, so in advance of her years——

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Perfectly abnormal!

MRS. PANMURE.

That was the expression he used—abnormal—so abnormal that what she most needs at present is brain-rest——

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Then perhaps Miss Quarendon is *too* clever.

DULCIE.

[*Rather maliciously.*] Ha, ha !

MRS. PANMURE.

Do let me finish, auntie—brain-rest and bright companionship. *There's* where Josepha is invaluable ; in spite of what she has gone through, Josey has the happiest of dispositions.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Combined, I am afraid, with a *slight* freedom of manner.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Smiling.*] You don't like her, aunt Corisande ; that's plain. Nor does Dulcie.

DULCIE.

[*Languidly.*] The fact is, aunt, Miss Quarendon is what is commonly termed a man's woman. The men swallow her at a gulp.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

I fancy that must be the case. Your uncle Alfred is positively silly over her.

MRS. PANMURE.

Why is it "silly" to be kind ?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

She's almost a stranger to him ; we haven't been here forty-eight hours. A man of your uncle's age, too !

DULCIE.

Mr. Stulkeley—the frigid Mr. Stulkeley !—even he contrives to unbend when he speaks to her.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

And little Mr. Woodhouse. Absurd !

DULCIE.

They hover round her like bees round a flower.

MRS. PANMURE.

You see, bees love a *sunflower*.

DULCIE.

Ho ! You'll never get anything severe out of Lottie, aunt Corisande, if you try till doomsday.

[HUGH LORING, *a well-groomed, cheery, fresh-coloured young man with a vacuous face, enters at the door in the centre.*

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Rising.*] Ah !

LORING.

[*Shaking hands with* MRS. PANMURE.] How'r'yer once more ? [*To* DULCIE.] 'Ullo. Dulce !

DULCIE.

[*Calmly.*] Hallo, old thing!

LORING.

[*Shaking hands with* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.]
How'r'yer again?

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To* LORING.] Have you motored over, or driven?

LORING.

Dog-cart. [*Going to the fireplace.*] Father's took the car to Shobdon, to hear the political gents..

DULCIE.

Taken.

LORING.

Hey?

DULCIE.

Your father has *taken* the car.

LORING.

[*Puzzled.*] Oh—z'actly. [*To* MRS. PANMURE.] I say, hard lines, Mrs. Panmure! Are we in for a lot o' beastly snow?

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Standing behind the chair between the settee on the left and the fanteuil-stool.*] You're thinking of the hunting?

DULCIE.

[*Irritably.*] Why, what do you imagine he's thinking of, Lottie?

LORING.

[*Ruefully.*] It was to 'a been a reg'lar thick week. The hounds were to meet at Stoke's Cross to-morrow; and Friday father's invited some swells to shoot the home covers.

MRS. PANMURE.

Oh, you'll be able to get at the poor pheasants.

LORING.

Not if the snow lays on the underwood.

DULCIE.

Lies.

LORING.

Hey?

DULCIE.

[*Rising.*] *Lies.*

LORING.

[*Aghast.*] *Who* does?

DULCIE.

[*Stamping her foot.*] *Lies.*

LORING.

What are?

DULCIE.

If the snow *lies* on the underwood.

LORING.

[*Relieved.*] Oh-h-h! *Z'*actly.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Well, if it would give the unfortunate birds a rest——

DULCIE.

[*Moving towards* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.] Yes, if it would give the birds a rest, as a topic of conversation—and the foxes also—I'd bless the snow on my bended knees.

LORING.

Dulce !

DULCIE.

[*Sitting at the round table.*] Oh, la, la ; la, la ! I'm sick of hearing about hunting and shooting.

LORING.

I—I beg pardon.

DULCIE.

[*Drumming upon the table.*] Bored to tears with it.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Distressed.*] Dulcie !

LORING.

[*Coming to* DULCIE.] I—I forgot. You've said so before, haven't you ?

DULCIE.

Hinted at it ; but now you've got it straight from the shoulder, Hughie.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE, *in a flutter.*] Auntie——

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Rising.*] Yes, dear?

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Going to the door on the left.*] Perhaps Dulcie and Mr. Loring——

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Joining MRS. PANMURE.*] Yes, I expect so.

[*The two ladies retire somewhat precipitately.*]

LORING.

[*In an aggrieved tone.*] 'Pon my soul, Dulce! Beastly shame to jump on me in the presence of others!

DULCIE.

[*Rising and walking about.*] Oh!

LORING.

Pitchin' into me before Mrs. P. and your aunt!

DULCIE.

[*On the left.*] It was your grammar that upset me.

LORING.

[*Dejectedly.*] My grammar is a trifle off 's'afternoon, I own.

DULCIE.

[*Confronting him.*] Tell me, how the deuce are we ever to shove along together if you talk, grammatically or otherwise, of nothing but hunting and shooting

for half the year and flies and fishing for the remaining six months? [*Pacing the room.*] Oh! [*He seats himself, with a blank look, upon the settee on the right.*] Why haven't *you* gone to Shobdon, pray, to hear Mr. Stulkeley and uncle Alfred hold forth at the Corn Exchange?

LORING.

I'm no hand at politics.

DULCIE.

Ha! There you are!

LORING.

[*Leaning his head upon his fists.*] Oh, I know I'm not brainy, Dulce, and that sort o' thing.

DULCIE.

How do you know? You've never used your brains.

LORING.

This kiddie here—little Myrtle—she'll lick me into fits over an argument, Myrtle will.

DULCIE.

You needn't argue; arguing isn't a sign of intelligence.

LORING.

[*Looking up.*] I *have* thought of how I might improve myself, too—enlarge my mental outlook, as you put it the other day.

DULCIE.

[*Coming to him, softening.*] Have you? [*He nods.*]
Good man! [*Rumpling his hair affectionately.*] Sorry
I showed you up.

LORING.

At best I could never make myself more than fair
to middlin'——

DULCIE.

Bosh!

LORING.

Same time—[*contracting his brows*] Dulce——

DULCIE.

[*Tenderly.*] Eh?

LORING.

This governess of Myrtle's — Miss Wot's-r-
name——

DULCIE.

[*Freezing.*] Miss Quarendon?

LORING.

S'pose one may call her a governess.

DULCIE.

What of her?

LORING.

She's an awf'ly talented gal.

DULCIE.

Awfully.

LORING.

And easy to get on with.

DULCIE

Extremely easy to get on with.

LORING.

Now, if she'd give me an hour or two's coachin'—say, three days a week—with the permission o' the Panmures, o' course——

DULCIE.

[*Her lips becoming thinner.*] Of course.

LORING.

Read some stiff books to me—out-and-out stiff'uns—or let me read to her—any system she chooses——

DULCIE.

[*Rigidly.*] Any system she chooses. Yes?

LORING.

It 'ud benefit her as well as me. I'd make it worth her while, naturally.

DULCIE.

Naturally.

LORING.

[*Rising, beaming.*] Anything in it?

DULCIE.

I consider it a perfectly admirable suggestion.

LORING.

You do !

DULCIE.

[*Her eyes flashing.*] And the sooner you carry it into effect the better.

[*She turns from him and stalks to the door on the left.*]

LORING.

[*Gazing after her in astonishment.*] Dulce ! [*She goes out. He follows her, bewildered.*] Anything wrong, Dulce ?

[*As he disappears, BRABNER and KITTS—the latter a young, sullen-looking footman bearing a tray—enter at the door in the centre and proceed to lay the tea.*]

BRABNER.

[*Continuing a conversation, after glancing round the room.*] Cleanin' your plate, were you ? [*Spreading a cloth upon the round table.*] That's your excuse for missin' mornin' prayers, is it ?

KITTS.

[*Depositing the tray upon the table.*] My 'ands were covered with plate-powder.

BRABNER.

Well, you take it from me, Albert, you must arrange your dooties different in the future, if you wish to remain at The Clewers.

KITTS.

[*Fetching dishes of cake, etc., from the corridlor.*]
Sickenin' fuss!

BRABNER.

In this 'ouse, young feller, it'll have to be plate *and* prayers.

KITTS.

[*Assisting BRABNER to dispose the dishes.*] One thing I notice.

BRABNER.

Wot's that?

KITTS.

The guv'nor don't seem to enjye our mornin' an' evenin' services any more than wot I do.

BRABNER.

Ho?

KITTS.

Sermon nights espeshully. Pore un'appy man, whenever 'e preaches one of his little sermons, 'e's a pityble objiect.

BRABNER.

Ellerquence may not be Mr. Panmure's strong point, I grant. Still, it's 'ardly becomin' in an under-servant——

[JOSEPHA and MYRTLE descend the stairs.
JOSEPHA is singing gaily and the sound of
her voice comes through the open doorway.]

KITTS.

[*With a motion of the head.*] Ah, that's the most

likeable person at this end o' the buildin', Mr. Brabner.

BRABNER.

[*Softly.*] Well, I don't say you're far wrong there, my boy.

[JOSEPHIA enters with MYRTLE. BRABNER smiles benignly on JOSEPHIA, who smiles in response, and the two men withdraw.]

MYRTLE.

[*Her feet in huge, square-toed shoes—surveying the tea-table, peevishly.*] I want my tea.

JOSEPHIA.

You must wait till the gentlemen return.

MYRTLE.

These visitors of ours disorganise everything. [*Taking a small cake from the table.*] Why are we entertaining this Mr. Stulkeley, Josepha?

JOSEPHIA.

[*At the fireplace.*] Mr. Hebblethwaite proposed it, I understand.

MYRTLE.

[*Seating herself at the round table and munching her cake.*] For what reason?

JOSEPHIA.

They're friends—political associates.

MYRTLE.

At that rate, my great-uncle might inflict half the House of Commons upon us.

JOSEPHA.

[*Moving about.*] You see, Myr, parliament's not sitting for the moment and so Mr. Stulkeley is on the stump.

MYRTLE.

How vulgar you are !

JOSEPHA.

This week he's waving his banner in our district.

MYRTLE.

[*Wearily.*] Tariff Reform, I presume ?

JOSEPHA.

Yes ; and Mr. Hebblethwaite thought it would be convenient to Mr. Stulkeley and his cousin and secretary, Mr. Woodhouse——

MYRTLE.

Odious creature !

JOSEPHA.

If they were allowed to make The Clewers their head-quarters. The big meeting is at Polehampton to-morrow.

MYRTLE.

Are the ladies to attend ?

JOSEPHA.

Rather! I'm longing for it.

MYRTLE.

[*Raising her skirt and wiping her fingers upon her petticoat.*] I shall certainly plead indisposition.

JOSEPHA.

[*Leaning over MYRTLE.*] Oh, come, Myr; do buck up! Don't view life in such a grey light.

MYRTLE

[*Rising.*] My de-ah Josepha——

JOSEPHA.

It'll be ripping fun, being on the platform.

MYRTLE.

[*Walking away to the fireplace, fastidiously.*] My deah Josepha, sometimes I find your high spirits too terribly oppressive.

JOSEPHA.

Do you!

MYRTLE.

Either you've no liver or your troubles have blunted your finer perceptions.

JOSEPHA.

You horrid little pig, Myr! It's because my perceptions are keen that I'm as brisk and cheerful as I am. Ah, it would do *you* good to have a taste of poverty some day.

MYRTLE.

Doubtless.

JOSEPHA.

Poverty such as I've experienced. Then your mind would dwell less upon your liver, and you'd learn to appraise things at their full value—comfort, a home, roaring fires, a luxurious bed to lie in, pretty walls to gaze at. [*Approaching* MYRTLE.] You shrimp!

MYRTLE.

[*Disdainfully.*] Pig—shrimp——!

JOSEPHA.

Do you know I've lived in a bare, seven-and-six-penny furnished lodging in Bloomsbury?

MYRTLE.

Bloomsbury conveys nothing to me.

JOSEPHA.

No, you worm!

MYRTLE.

Worm——!

JOSEPHA.

The desolation of it! And you dare to sniff at me for feeling joyous. Insect!

MYRTLE.

Insect——!

JOSEPHA.

Do you love your mother?

MYRTLE.

A strange question.

JOSEPHA.

Do you ?

MYRTLE.

I trust I am not destitute of natural affection.

JOSEPHA.

That alone should make you happy. But, no ; you haven't a tithe of the love for her that I have. She's *my* mother, father, sister, brother, friend, all in one—and an angel into the bargain.

MYRTLE.

Don't be rhapsodical, Josey.

JOSEPHA.

She's brought me into harbour, after such a tossing about—into harbour ! [*Sitting in the arm-chair by the fauteuil-stool.*] Myrtle dearie, often and often, when I'm by myself, I go down on all-fours and kiss the carpet, out of pure thankfulness.

MYRTLE.

Harbours don't have carpets. That comes of employing metaphors.

JOSEPHA.

Ha, ha ! [*Stretching out her arms to MYRTLE, who goes to her and sits upon her lap.*] But I do ; I kiss the carpet in thankfulness—thankfulness that the

earth under me is solid once more. [*Embracing MYRTLE.*] Oh, Myrtle!

MYRTLE.

[*Responding to the embrace.*] Pig - shrimp—worm
—insect—

JOSEPHA.

[*Hugging the child.*] Precious! [*The hoot of a motor-horn, several times repeated, is heard, proceeding from the right. JOSEPHA jumps up, nearly capsizing MYRTLE.*] Here they are! [*Putting MYRTLE in order.*] Sorry.

MYRTLE.

Careless!

[*MRS. PANMURE and MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE enter from the left, go out at the door in the centre, and disappear on the right. KITTS is seen hurrying along the corridor.*]

MRS. PANMURE.

[*As she passes through the room.*] The car.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*At her heels.*] I hope Alfred hasn't caught a chill. He's one of those who appear robust—

JOSEPHA.

[*To MYRTLE.*] Scissors! Your nose is still frightfully red, Myr.

[*She produces a little metal box containing a preparation for the face and smears the stuff heedlessly upon MYRTLE'S nose.*]

MYRTLE.

[*Resenting the operation.*] Tscha! Pish!

[*With a nose as white as a clown's, MYRTLE walks away to the right and seats herself upon the settee as DULCIE enters at the door on the left followed by LORING. JOSEPHA mends the fire and throws some logs on. It is evident that DULCIE'S coolness towards LORING has not abated.*

LORING.

[*To DULCIE, in an undertone, appealingly.*] Dulce——!

DULCIE.

[*Turning to him icily.*] Did you speak?

LORING.

Anything amiss, Dulce?

DULCIE.

[*Dropping her voice.*] Nothing now.

LORING.

Now?

DULCIE.

Now that there are a few fairly intelligent men on the premises.

[*DULCIE moves over to the right as MRS. PANMURE enters with STULKELEY, a tall, dignified man of forty-two with a noble forehead and a precise, formal manner.*

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To STULKELEY.*] Have you had a successful meeting?

STULKELEY.

Quite. Quite an encouraging meeting on a small scale.

MRS. PANMURE.

Let me introduce Mr. Hugh Loring.

LORING.

[*To STULKELEY.*] How'r'yer?

[*STULKELEY bows to LORING, acknowledges DULCIE's presence with a polite smile, and then drifts to the fireplace and to JOSEPHA. DULCIE elevates her brows in displeasure.*]

STULKELEY.

Not that the proceedings were altogether harmonious. [*To JOSEPHA.*] Miss Quarendon's description last night of the humours of the Shobdon native was fully justified.

[*HEBBLETHWAITE, a jovial, rubicund man of fifty-five, enters with MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.*]

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To MRS. PANMURE and DULCIE.*] Ah, Lottie! Ah, Dulcie! Back again, my dears! Glad to see the fire, I can tell you. [*To LORING, who is sitting wretchedly upon the settee at the back.*] Hallo, Mr. Loring!

LORING.

How'r'yer?

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Joining JOSEPHIA and STULKELEY.*] Is that little Miss Josey?

[*MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE also is displeased and glances significantly at DULCIE. WOODHOUSE and PANMURE enter. WOODHOUSE is a foppishly tailored, finical little gentleman of thirty, PANMURE a depressed, sandy man of forty-four, once good-looking but now scant of hair and with a variegated, bilious complexion.*

WOODHOUSE.

[*Holding up his hands.*] Oh, my dear Mrs. Panmure! My dear Miss Anstice! Oh, my dear ladies! I really do congratulate you on not having patronized our show this afternoon. Oh, what an experience! [*Catching sight of JOSEPHIA and joining the group at the fireplace.*] You were quite right, Miss Quarendon—primeval savages!

PANMURE.

I warned you it was a rowdy, one-eyed place. [*Going to LORING.*] Hallo, Hughie!

LORING.

How'r'yer?

DULCIE.

[*To MRS. PANMURE and MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE, in a whisper.*] Just look!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*In a whisper.*] Astonishing!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Pacifically.*] Hush, hush !

DULCIE.

Gathering round that girl !

[BRABNER *enters at the door in the centre, carrying a tea-urn.* KITTs *follows with dishes of hot toast and muffins.*

MRS. PANMURE.

Tea. [*Sitting at the round table.*] Poor people !
They must want tea badly.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Sitting at the round table—sharply.*] I do. [*The servants withdraw.* MRS. PANMURE *pours out tea.* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *turns in the direction of her husband.*] Alfred—Alfred——[*The group at the fire-place breaks up.* JOSEPHA *moves to the settee at the back and—*LORING *having risen to talk to PANMURE—sits there.*] Alfred—tea !

HEBBLETHWAITE.

We've had it, my dear.

STULKELEY.

[*Coming forward.*] They were kind enough to provide tea for us at the Corn Exchange.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Coming forward.*] Yes, and I believe they'd boiled some of their corn *in* it. Ha, ha !

WOODHOUSE.

[*Coming forward.*] No, no; it was genuine tea, I'm convinced—grown in the county.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Giving a cup of tea to Mrs. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Auntie. No sugar, I remember. [*Handing a cup to DULCIE who is standing at the table.*] Dulcie. [*Filling another cup.*] Josey dear——

WOODHOUSE.

[*Advancing and taking the cup from Mrs. PANMURE.*] Permit me.

[*He carries the cup to JOSEPHA, upon which HEBBLETHWAITE picks up one of the dishes from the table and goes to JOSEPHA with it. STULKELEY immediately follows HEBBLETHWAITE's example, and again DULCIE and Mrs. HEBBLETHWAITE exchange glances.*]

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Holding up a cup.*] Mr. Loring?

LORING.

[*Leaving PANMURE.*] No, thanks.

[*He also removes a dish from the table and, unconscious of the enormity of the act, conveys it to JOSEPHA.*]

DULCIE.

[*To Mrs. HEBBLETHWAITE, gasping.*] Well! That takes the cake, in every sense!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To DULCIE.*] The muffins have gone already.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Handing a cup of tea to MYRTLE.*] Darling.

[*MYRTLE rises to receive her cup and to help herself to bread-and-butter; then she walks off with her cup and plate and sits upon the fauteuil-stool. The three ladies at the round table stare at her in amazement.*

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Under her breath.*] Mercy on us!

DULCIE.

Heavens!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Faintly.*] What a disfigurement!

[*They produce their pocket-handkerchiefs as PANMURE, who has been standing at the back moodily, his hands in his trouser-pockets, advances and addresses MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.*

PANMURE.

Old Alfred did splendidly this afternoon, Corry—backed Mr. Stulkeley up in fine style.

MRS. PANMURE *and* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*In a whisper.*] St. John——.

PANMURE.

Eh—wha'——? [MRS. PANMURE, MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE, and DULCIE touch their noses and point at MYRTLE who is innocently absorbed in her tea.] Great Scot!

[He takes out his pocket-handkerchief as STULKELEY comes forward.]

STULKELEY.

[To PANMURE.] Did I hear you praising Hebblethwaite? [PANMURE nods.] I cordially agree; his speech was worthy of a more important occasion. [PANMURE moves to the fireplace, giving MYRTLE'S nose an ineffectual rub with his handkerchief in passing. She looks up, startled and indignant. STULKELEY replaces the dish which he is carrying upon the round table.] I hope he'll be in similar form to-morrow.

[He seats himself on the settee beside DULCIE as WOODHOUSE advances.]

WOODHOUSE.

I say, Mr. Panmure, who was that low fellow who put those confounded impudent questions at the end of the meeting?

PANMURE.

Percy Jones, the Shobdon grocer.

WOODHOUSE.

At one moment I felt tempted to knock his common head off. [Crossing to PANMURE, he encounters MYRTLE, stares at her, and recoils.] 1—1—pon my word, I did.

[MYRTLE *returns his stare loftily. He steals past her and goes to PANMURE as HEBBLETHWAITE comes to the round table and puts his dish down.*

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Mr. Percy Jones, was he? Ho, ho! An admirable chap; admirable! [*Chuckling.*] Ha, ha, ha! [MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *makes a whispered communication to him.*] Eh? [*Looking at MYRTLE.*] Lor' bless me! [*Producing his handkerchief.*] Yes, I should be delighted to improve my acquaintance with Mr. Percy Jones—delighted.

[*He joins PANMURE and WOODHOUSE, rubbing MYRTLE'S nose with his handkerchief on his way. There is a fresh display of indignation on MYRTLE'S part. LORING deposits his dish upon the table on the left and goes to the men at the fireplace. JOSEPHA comes to the round table, carrying her tea-cup, and MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE and MRS. PANMURE direct her attention to MYRTLE. JOSEPHA looks at MYRTLE, starts in dismay, and, taking out her handkerchief, rubs the child's nose.*

MYRTLE.

Ga-a-ah! [*To avoid further persecution, MYRTLE twists herself round towards the fire, whereupon PANMURE again attacks her with his handkerchief.*] Ya-a-ah!

[*She wriggles herself free and marches in high dudgeon to the round table, where she leaves her plate and cup and saucer.*

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Rising.*] Josey dear, darling Myrtle is to dine with the grown-ups to-night. I think she should have an hour's rest upon her bed.

JOSEPHIA.

[*Seizing MYRTLE's arm and leading her to the door in the centre.*] Yes, yes.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE, inviting her to withdraw.*] Shall we——?

MYRTLE.

[*Resisting.*] You are all worrying me to death. I decline to rest.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*At the door.*] Darling, for beauty's sake.

MYRTLE.

I attach no importance to beauty. I'm surprised at you, mother.

[*JOSEPHIA coaxes MYRTLE into the corridor—the child still protesting—and they go up the stairs. MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE and MRS. PANMURE are about to follow when DULCIE joins them.*]

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To DULCIE.*] Dulcie—[*glancing at LORING*].—Mr. Loring.

DULCIE.

[*Shrugging her shoulders.*] Oh, Hughie must amuse himself. My head's splitting.

[*The three ladies retire and they too ascend the stairs.* STULKELEY, *who has risen with* DULCIE, *now walks slowly to the door in the centre.*

WOODHOUSE.

[*Going to him.*] Do you want me, Reggie?

STULKELEY.

No, thank you very much, my dear Talbot. [*To* HEBBLETHWAITE.] Hebblethwaite, you'll find me in the library.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Who is talking to PANMURE—to* STULKELEY.] I'll come to you.

STULKELEY.

[*To* PANMURE.] So kind of you to place your room at my disposal, dear Mr. Panmure.

PANMURE.

[*To* STULKELEY.] Don't mention it; you're welcome.

STULKELEY.

I appreciate your self-denial.

[STULKELEY *goes out and* LORING *approaches* WOODHOUSE, *who is lighting a cigarette.*

LORING.

[*To* WOODHOUSE.] Excuse me; my name's Loring.

I'm at home here. Would you care to knock the balls about for half-an-hour?

WOODHOUSE.

My dear Mr. Lawrie, you are too charming! But I don't play billiards; I wish I did. [*Buttonholing him.*] If you could make up a four for Bridge, now!

LORING.

[*Lowering his voice.*] Yes, but cards are barred in this house.

WOODHOUSE.

Not really!

LORING.

Fact.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Taking his arm.*] Then I'll play you a hundred up with pleasure. [*They go out together.*]

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To PANMURE.*] Well, I'll go and have my talk with Stulkeley. We've got to arrange the line we take to-morrow. [*Moving to the door in the centre.*] What are you going to be up to?

PANMURE.

I? [*Constrainedly.*] Oh, I—I've got my sermon to prepare.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Pausing.*] Sermon?

PANMURE.

Yes, I—I preach a sort o' sermon twice a week at evening prayers—Wednesdays and Saturdays.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*With a twinkle.*] You do !

PANMURE.

Seven or eight minutes, you know—not more ; a mere trifle. Sermonette, I call it. [*Crossing to the writing-table anxiously and fidgeting with some writing-paper.*] By George, though, I haven't the remotest idea what I shall treat you to to-night !

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Ho, ho, ho ! [*Returning.*] I must be careful not to catch your eye while you're sermonetting.

PANMURE.

Oh, you can jeer. [*Leaving the writing-table.*] It's an excellent thing for the servants. Besides, I'm not such a duffer at it, when I'm in fettle.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

No, but—[*poking him in the ribs*] ha, ha, ha !—you !

PANMURE.

[*Forcing a laugh.*] He, he, he !

HEBBLETHWAITE.

We'd no sermonettes when I was last with you—

simply a chapter and a hymn or two. When did you start sermonetting?

PANMURE.

About a month after the new parson came to Polehampton. [*Sitting upon the settee on the right, his tone suddenly changing.*] Alfred——

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Eh?

PANMURE.

[*Quietly.*] Damn him!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Ho, ho, ho!

PANMURE.

Damn him, damn him, damn him, damn him!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Ha, ha, ha! [*Wiping his eyes.*] He doesn't strike me as being a bad chap, either.

PANMURE.

No, I s'pose he *ain't* a bad chap. I s'pose he's what you'd term a good chap. But he's managed to make my home a doocid deal more sanctimonious than it's ever been since I married, and *that's* saying something. He's put the finishing touch to my missus; b'George, he has!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Pursing his lips.*] H'm! I thought last night——

PANMURE.

[*Looking at* HEBBLETHWAITE.] You twigged—no cards? [HEBBLETHWAITE *nods.*] Lottie's shut the drawing-room up.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Why?

PANMURE.

Because the card-tables are there, and—[*as if repeating a lesson*] and she doesn't want to pain me while I'm accustoming myself to the deprivation. [*Wildly.*] I know what's going to happen; I know. I'm sure of it; I'm certain of it!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

What?

PANMURE.

When the room's reopened, I shall find the tables gone; I shall find 'em clean gone. I know I shall; I know I shall!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Shouldn't be surprised, St. John.

PANMURE.

The only indoor games allowed now are billiards and jig-saw puzzles. *He* plays billiards, or *that* 'ud be abolished.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Mr. Pruyn?

PANMURE.

Flatters himself he can play. [*Whimpering.*] Damn

him, the beggar's cut the cloth! He's cut the cloth in two places!

[JOSEPHA has come down the stairs and now enters at the door in the centre. A book is tucked under her arm.

JOSEPHA.

Oh! [*Shutting the door.*] I beg your pardon.

PANMURE.

[*Rising.*] All right; no harm done.

[*She goes softly to the door on the left.*

JOSEPHA.

[*At the door, holding up the book.*] A novel.
[*Smiling.*] Don't split on me.

[*She withdraws. The two men watch the closing of the door.*

PANMURE.

[*After the silence, in a low voice.*] Ah, that's the one speck o' brightness in this dull hole of a house.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Yes, she's a jolly little woman.

PANMURE.

[*Meditatively.*] Dulcie's got her knife into her, I've begun to suspect. She's too pretty for Dulcie.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

I hope Lottie won't let that——

PANMURE.

Oh, no; trust Lottie. Lottie's a trump; *she* wouldn't do anything unjust. [*Abruptly, laying a finger on HEBBLETHWAITE'S waistcoat.*] Mark you, I haven't said a word against my wife, Alfred. Lottie's far and away above *me*; that's all that's askew between us. How she came to stoop to me is a mystery; she was aware I'd been rather a loose fish. I b'lieve that's why she did it—to reform me.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Probably.

PANMURE.

And she *has* reformed me. She's made another man of me, brought out all my best qualities; b'George, she has! [*Brightening.*] I'm really not a bad specimen of the ordinary English country gentleman, Alfred.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Encouragingly.*] Quite the reverse.

PANMURE.

Hospitable, generous to the poor round about me, a Justice of the Peace, and so forth! And I owe everything to Lottie. I swore to myself on my wedding morning I wouldn't disappoint her; and I haven't, and don't intend. [*Walking to the fireplace, flourishing his coat-tails.*] No, b'George, I don't!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Oh, well, come, come! If you can look at things in this light, you ought to feel tolerably happy.

PANMURE.

I *do* feel happy. I *am* happy. Occasionally I have a fit o' the blues; you've just seen me in one. But, take me altogether, I'm happy and—and—and proud. [*Hitting his chest.*] Proud, b'George!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Again moving towards the door.*] And I dare say that in course of time Lottie's piety'll tone down a bit. Women fluctuate; the more extreme they are, the greater the chance of a change. [*Turning.*] Ha! I had *my* difficulties to contend with in *my* married life some years back.

PANMURE.

[*Condescendingly.*] Did you, my dear feller?

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Before I knew you. But it wasn't piety in Corry's case.

PANMURE.

No?

HEBBLETHWAITE.

It was jealousy with her.

PANMURE.

[*Raising his eyebrows.*] Jealousy? Marvellous!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Slightly nettled.*] What the devil is there that's marvellous in it? Marvellous or not, it was *con-*foundedly inconvenient while it lasted. However,

the point is that Corry has become a different woman since those days—a totally different woman.

PANMURE.

[*Not interested.*] Indeed?

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Now I might spend a summer afternoon with a siren on a lonely rock; my old lady has the most complete confidence in me. Bless her heart! Ha, ha! [*Opening the door.*] But you want to get on with your sermonette.

PANMURE.

If you don't object, ol' boy.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

I'll run along to Stulkeley.

[*He departs and, with an air of determination, PANMURE produces his cigar-case, lights a cigar, and makes for the writing-table. There he sits and, humming the refrain of a faded music-hall song, resolutely takes up a pen and proceeds to write. Apparently inspiration fails him, for, after a while, he leans back in his chair, ruffles his hair, and utters a deep groan. Again he applies himself to his task, scribbles a few words and, with another groan, again breaks down. He rises painfully, pen in hand, in a dismal voice resumes his humming, and, helpless and woebegone, wanders about the room. Suddenly his eyes rest upon the door on the left and an idea occurs to him. He*

goes to the door, opens it a little way, and pops his head into the adjoining apartment.

PANMURE.

[*Feebly.*] Hallo!

JOSEPHA.

[*From the next room.*] Yes?

PANMURE.

Hi! Come here a second. [*He moves away from the door and presently JOSEPHA appears.*] I'm in such a shocking mess, Miss Quarendon.

JOSEPHA.

[*Sympathetically.*] A mess? [*Closing the door and approaching him.*] Anything I can do for you?

PANMURE.

My sermon——

JOSEPHA.

What about it?

PANMURE.

My discourse for to-night——

JOSEPHA.

Aren't you pleased with it?

PANMURE.

Pleased with it! It doesn't exist. I haven't written it.

JOSEPHA.

Why not?

PANMURE.

Haven't the ghost of a notion for it; can't hit on one.

JOSEPHIA.

Oh, Mr. Panmure, why do you leave your prep. till the last moment?

PANMURE.

I don't. My brain's continually at work. But I'm run dry. I've come to the end of my tether.

JOSEPHIA.

[*Thoughtfully.*] Your last effort wasn't very impressive, was it?

PANMURE.

Impressive! An utter fiasco, b'George!

JOSEPHIA.

Did Lottie scold you for it?

PANMURE.

She didn't exactly scold. But she opened her eyes at me—you know——

JOSEPHIA.

[*Nodding.*] H'm.

PANMURE.

Damn it, I did want to score top-notch this evening! [*Pacing the room.*] These political blokes in the house! Beasts! With their parliamentary airs! Supercilious beasts! I shall see 'em bowing their heads to hide

their faces. Their attitude'll look devotional, but I shall guess what's going on inside 'em !

[*He sits upon the settee by the fireplace in a state of deep dejection.*]

JOSEPHA.

[*Coming to the back of the armchair by the settee—firmly.*] Now, Mr. Panmure, listen to me. Shall I tell you where you make a mistake ?

PANMURE.

[*Violently.*] It doesn't help to bully me.

JOSEPHA.

I'm not bullying you.

PANMURE.

Bullying won't help me in the least.

JOSEPHA.

[*Striking the back of the chair.*] I'm not g. bully you.

PANMURE.

[*Sulkily.*] Very well, then ; mind you don't.

JOSEPHA.

The mistake you make is that you rely too much on your own invention.

PANMURE.

Whose invention *should* I rely on ?

JOSEPHA.

Any eminent divine's. You ought to crib.

PANMURE.

[*Turning to her.*] Crib?

JOSEPHA.

Copy other men's sermons and addresses—make extracts from them.

PANMURE.

[*Loweringly.*] That's unprincipled, ain't it?

JOSEPHA.

Half the parsons do it. [*Laughing.*] Ha, ha, ha! Anything's better than such a performance as you gave us on Saturday.

PANMURE.

Rub it in! Rub it in!

JOSEPHA.

Surely you've some volumes of sermons in the library.

PANMURE.

[*Rising.*] I dun'no *what's* in the library. It was my poor old dad's library; I've never had time to go through the shelves.

JOSEPHA.

[*Reproachfully.*] Never had time! He's been dead ten years, hasn't he?

PANMURE.

[*Breaking out again.*] It's no use bullying me! Bullying isn't of the slightest service. [*Walking away to the right.*] What I require is a little assistance to get me over to-night. [*Shaking his fists in the air.*] Once I'm over to-night——!

JOSEPHIA.

[*Cogitating.*] There's an array of Lives of the Saints in the library; you could cram from *them*. [*With sudden excitement.*] Is to-day a saint's day?

PANMURE

[*Dully.*] Dun'no.

JOSEPHIA.

If it is, we've got a subject for your discourse ready-made. [*Pointing to the writing-table.*] Look in the Kalendar—the Churchman's Kalendar! [*He searches among some books which are in a rack upon the writing-table.*] Oh, do bustle, Mr. Panmure!

PANMURE.

[*Finding the book.*] Mowbray's Churchman's Kalendar.

[*She runs to the settee on the right and, kneeling upon the settee, holds out her hand for the book. He stands behind the settee and they examine the book together.*]

JOSEPHIA.

January—the twenty-sixth—here we are—[*disappointed*] oh, no saint! What a blow!

PANMURE.

Just my infernal luck !

JOSEPHA.

Wait, wait, wait. [*Turning the leaves of the book*] You're so impatient. I rather fancy——[*triumphantly*] yes! "Addenda"! January—twentieth—twenty-fourth—twenty-sixth—hooray! [*leaving the settee*] St. Polycarp! St. Polycarp!

PANMURE.

[*Replacing the kalendar and then advancing.*] Who was he ?

JOSEPHA.

One of the Apostolic Fathers. We've got the *Apostolic Fathers*——[*thinking*] bottom shelf, right-hand side of the door as you go in.

PANMURE.

[*Catching her enthusiasm.*] You are a brick!

JOSEPHA.

It's as easy as A.B.C. You begin with a short exordium.

PANMURE.

[*His jaw falling.*] Oh, lor'! What's that?

JOSEPHA.

An introduction. [*Improvising.*] "My dear friends——"

PANMURE.

Dear friends? Not the servants!

JOSEPHA.

Sssh, sssh, sssh! "My dear friends——"

PANMURE.

Hang it all! Class distinctions!

JOSEPHA.

"My dear friends, I will commence my little talk to you this evening by putting a simple question to you."

PANMURE.

Hold hard! [*Walking about.*] Let me get that into my skull. [*Mumbling.*] "——a simple question to you."

JOSEPHA.

"I ask you, when we open our eyes on the morning of every succeeding twenty-sixth of January, whose name is the first to spring to our lips?"

PANMURE.

[*At the back.*] Whose?

JOSEPHA.

Why, St. Polycarp's!

PANMURE.

Oh, of course!

JOSEPHA.

"But, lest there should be one or two present who have but an imperfect recollection of the salient incidents of Polycarp's career——"

PANMURE.

[*Returning to her.*] I see! I grasp it!

JOSEPHA.

“I propose that we briefly refresh our memories as to who and what Polycarp was.”

PANMURE.

Oh, it's lovely—lovely!

JOSEPHA.

Then you give 'em five solid minutes of St. Polycarp, borrowed from the *Apostolic Fathers*——

PANMURE.

It's a knock-out—a blooming knock-out!

JOSEPHA.

And wind up with the deduction.

PANMURE.

[*Blankly.*] Deduction?

JOSEPHA.

The go-and-do-likewise. Oh, come, you're equal to a tag of twenty or thirty words, Mr. Panmure!

PANMURE.

[*Rubbing his hands together.*] Oh, won't Lottie be struck all of a heap!

JOSEPHA.

Hope so.

PANMURE.

This'll show Lottie what I'm worth. [*Gleefully.*]
And how it'll bore those parliamentary bounders,
won't it?

JOSEPHA.

Ha, ha, ha!

PANMURE.

[*Pacing the room again.*] Great Scot, how it'll bore
'em! [*Suddenly downcast.*] Oh, I say!

JOSEPHA.

Eh?

PANMURE.

The *Apostolic Fathers* are in the library!

JOSEPHA.

Well?

PANMURE.

That stiff-necked Stulkeley is in possession there.

JOSEPHA.

[*Knitting her brows.*] Bother!

PANMURE.

[*Wrathfully.*] I am kept out of my library by him
and that toad Woodhouse. A gentleman under his
own roof, b'George, is deprived of the companionship
of his books! It's atrocious!

JOSEPHA.

Oh, it won't take a moment to sneak the *Apostolic Fathers*. [*He comes to her, appeased.*] Just rap at the door, and march in boldly.

PANMURE.

Miss Quarendon—Josey—I'm tremendously obliged to you ; b'George, I am !

JOSEPHA.

Nonsense !

PANMURE.

You're a true pal ; that's what I reckon you—a true pal. [*Eagerly.*] There's a terrific number of saints' days in the Kalendar, ain't there ?

JOSEPHA.

Nearly enough to provide you with material for a whole twelvemonth.

PANMURE.

And when it isn't a saint's day—— ?

JOSEPHA.

You can depend on me for a leg up.

PANMURE.

[*Ecstatically.*] I dun'no what I should do without you. Life 'ud be a blank, b'George !

JOSEPHA.

[*Drawing back.*] Thanks ; but you—you'll have to do without me some day.

PANMURE.

[*Alarmed.*] What d'ye mean?

JOSEPHA.

When Myrtle's outgrown me—goes abroad perhaps——

PANMURE.

She shan't go abroad. I won't have it; I'll stop it!

JOSEPHA.

[*Uncomfortably.*] I—I'm sure I'm in no hurry to leave Myrtle and Lottie.

PANMURE.

You shall never be kicked out of The Clewers on any pretence, I promise you. [*Gazing at her.*] You—you're a dear little gal, you are.

JOSEPHA.

Y-y-you'll be behindhand with your sermon.

PANMURE.

The dearest little girl in the world, b'George!

JOSEPHA.

[*Nervously.*] Ha, ha, ha! Do—do get on with your job. [*She goes out at the door on the left, hastily.*]

PANMURE.

Hi! Josey! You might give me the words of the tag. Josey——!

[*He follows her, and almost immediately a faint screech is heard from JOSEPHA and she comes running back, wiping her lips with her hand and with eyes ablaze. She leans against a chair on the right as PANMURE appears in the doorway with a scared face. His hair is disarranged and his necktie disordered.*

JOSEPHA.

[*Panting.*] How dare you! How dare you!

PANMURE.

I beg your pardon—I beg your pardon——

JOSEPHA.

Go away!

PANMURE.

A kiss of gratitude. [*Advancing.*] That's all it was—a kiss of gratitude, b'George!

JOSEPHA.

[*Retreating to the back of the round table.*] Don't you come near me!

PANMURE.

[*Piteously.*] I've apologised! Didn't you hear me? A gentleman can't do more.

JOSEPHA.

[*Picking up a plate threateningly.*] Go further off!

PANMURE.

[*Turning from her, pressing his temples.*] I never intended it; I swear I never intended it!

JOSEPHA.

Cad!

[She hurls the plate at him and it crashes at his heels. He gives a little leap in the air from fright and then throws himself upon the settee by the fireplace.]

PANMURE.

[Moaning.] Oh-h h! I dun'no what possessed me to do it. Oh-h-h!

JOSEPHA.

[Coming from behind the table, weeping into her handkerchief.] Oh! Oh!

PANMURE.

A kiss of gratitude! Nothing else! A kiss of gratitude!

JOSEPHA.

[Sobbing.] Brute! Brute!

PANMURE.

Oh, do forget it! Do pass it over!

JOSEPHA.

[Sinking upon the settee on the right.] Oh, how unlucky I am!

PANMURE.

Pass it over this once!

JOSEPHA.

[Rocking herself to and fro.] How unlucky I am!

PANMURE.

[*Sitting upright.*] Damn it, ain't I unlucky too!

JOSEPHA.

[*Beating her brow.*] Oh, and I thought I was in harbour!

PANMURE.

To behave as well as I've behaved all these years, and then for this to happen!

JOSEPHA.

I thought I was in harbour for a while; safely in harbour!

PANMURE.

[*Jumping up.*] You *are* in harbour; [*approaching her*] you *are*.

JOSEPHA.

[*Shrinking.*] Don't you come near me!

PANMURE.

Look here! I'll go away for a month. I will! I'll go somewhere for my health. I'm full o' gout.

JOSEPHA.

[*Getting to her feet.*] Oh, and I've had such a good time here! [*Moving towards the door in the centre.*] Such a good time!

PANMURE.

[*In a panic.*] Ah! Josey——!

JOSEPHA.

Keep off!

PANMURE.

What are you going to do?

JOSEPHA.

Such a restful, peaceful time!

PANMURE.

[*Frantically.*] You're not going to tell Lottie!

JOSEPHA.

[*Facing him.*] Tell Lottie!

PANMURE.

Josey, I've behaved so well all these years! You won't tell Lottie!

JOSEPHA.

[*At her full height.*] You—you—! To imagine such a thing!

PANMURE.

[*Unsteadily.*] Oh, you're—you're a duchess!

[*She goes out and ascends the stairs as he drops upon his knees to pick up the fragments of china.*]

END OF THE FIRST ACT.

THE SECOND ACT

The scene is that of the preceding act, but everybody is now dressed for dinner.

[MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE is seated upon the settee on the right, reading a book. JOSEPHA comes down the stairs and, opening the door in the centre, looks in as if she is searching for somebody. Her face is pale and her eyes red from weeping.]

JOSEPHA.

Ah! [*Entering.*] Here you are, dear Mrs. Hebblethwaite! [*Closing the door.*] I've just taken the liberty of going to your room.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

To find me?

JOSEPHA.

[*Advancing.*] To have a little chat with you on the quiet, before dinner, if I could manage to get it.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*With a touch of asperity.*] I dressed early, to set that organist free to muddle my nieces. [*Inspecting JOSEPHA through her lorgnette.*] A sweet frock!

JOSEPHA.

Thank you; I'm glad you like it. [*Hesitatingly.*]
Er—Mrs. Hebblethwaite——

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Yes, my dear?

JOSEPHA.

Forgive me for presuming on so short an acquaintance.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Genially.*] Rubbish!

JOSEPHA.

But—will you give me your advice about something?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Certainly; with pleasure. [*Eyeing JOSEPHA again.*]
You seem very upset.

JOSEPHA.

I? Well, I am, rather. [*Turning away and moving about.*] I—I've had a letter from a friend of mine which is worrying me dreadfully.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

A friend?

JOSEPHA.

A girl I was thick with in London; a girl who's had to turn out into the world, as I have. I mustn't mention her surname; her christian name's—her christian name's—Milly.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

What's Milly's trouble?

JOSEPHA.

Curious, isn't it? She's governessing in the country too.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Really?

JOSEPHA.

Not that there's anything particularly odd about that. There are hundreds of us—thousands—aren't there?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

I suppose your friend isn't quite so happily placed as you are?

JOSEPHA.

Ah, yes, she is—or was. There's the misery of it. What do you think has happened to her?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Delicately.*] Oh, my dear child!

JOSEPHA.

[*Her lip trembling.*] She's—she's been kissed.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Kissed?

JOSEPHA.

[*Quiveringly.*] Kissed, kissed!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Against her will ?

JOSEPHA.

Horridly. A wretch of a man suddenly began to make love to her.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

A man in the house ?

JOSEPHA.

Yes ; that's the worst part of the affair.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Belonging to the house, or merely a visitor ?

JOSEPHA.

[*Unprepared.*] E-eh ?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Is the fellow in any way attached to the house, or was he a guest ?

JOSEPHA.

She—she doesn't say.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Married or single ? [JOSEPHA *shakes her head.*] She supplies you with no details ?

JOSEPHA.

N-not many.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

What's her object in writing to you ?

JOSEPHA.

To—to tell me the news.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Dryly.*] Most interesting.

JOSEPHA.

And to ask what she's to do.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

With regard to—— ?

JOSEPHA.

The kiss.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Good gracious me, she doesn't want to know whether she's to give a receipt for it !

JOSEPHA.

[*Laughing in spite of herself.*] Ha, ha, ha ! No, no She wants to know whether she ought to stay.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

In the establishment where—— ?

JOSEPHA.

Where it occurred.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

I see.

JOSEPHA.

And I thought that, before I answered her letter——

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

You'd consult some elderly person.

JOSEPHA.

[*Standing before* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.] Without being in the least elderly, dear Mrs. Hebblethwaite——

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Now don't you try to humbug me, Miss Josepha.

JOSEPHA.

Without being in the least elderly, you *are* older and wiser than I am—or than Nelly is.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Nelly?

JOSEPHA.

[*Correcting herself.*] Milly.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

H'm! Surely the proper course for her to pursue is to inform the mistress of the house?

JOSEPHA.

[*Quickly.*] Oh, no, she wouldn't do that.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

No ?

JOSEPHA.

I—I gather she wouldn't do that on any account.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

The lady's husband, then—if there is a husband.
[JOSEPHA *is silent.*] Is there a husband ?

JOSEPHA.

Oh, yes, there—there's a husband. But she's determined not to give the slightest pain to either of her employers ; to—to—to people who've been excessively kind to her.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

That's all very fine ; but when——

JOSEPHA.

Oh, no ; she's as firm as a rock about it. She'd prefer to clear out without a word sooner than distress her employers.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Your friend appears to be extremely explicit on some points and reticent upon others.

JOSEPHA.

She—she is a bit uncommunicative. [*Clenching her hands.*] What she most wants to be told is whether it's consistent with a decent-minded girl's self-respect to remain on the spot after such an insult.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Keeping it to herself?

JOSEPHA.

Keeping it to herself.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Running the risk of meeting the man again, perhaps.

JOSEPHA.

P-perhaps.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Well, it's difficult for anybody as completely in the dark as I am to express an opinion.

JOSEPHA.

[*Artlessly.*] Yes, isn't it!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Poor Milly! Has she anything to reproach herself with, do you imagine?

JOSEPHA.

Reproach herself with?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Has she ever given the scamp the smallest encouragement?

JOSEPHA

No, no—! [*Checking herself.*] Not intentionally; I swear she hasn't.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Sighing.*] Of course, she's good-looking?

JOSEPHA.

[*With a pathetic little nod.*] H'm.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Decidedly pretty?

JOSEPHA.

H'm.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

The old story! What a curse beauty is to women who have to earn their living!

JOSEPHA.

[*Pensively.*] Except on the stage, or——

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Rising.*] Oh, I wish there were more women cursed with it on the stage. [*Laying her book aside and crossing to the fireplace.*] Well, it doesn't do to apply exactly the same standards of conduct to those who work for their bread-and-butter as to other people. [*Warming her hands at the fire.*] I take it that the loss of her position would be a serious thing for Miss Milly?

JOSEPHA.

Ah, yes, yes; every way! Girls who've once been petted and spoilt, and made princesses of, can't stand these knock-down blows as others can. [*Passionately.*] It's cruel! [*Sitting at the round table.*] Just as she

was getting her pluck back and learning to throw her chest out again! [*Losing control of herself and leaning her head upon her hands.*] Oh, it's too, too rough!

[*There is a pause, and then* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *slowly turns and looks at* JOSEPHA *half wonderingly, half suspiciously.*

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*After the silence, advancing a few steps and speaking in an altered tone.*] Miss Quarendon.

JOSEPHA.

[*Raising her head hastily.*] Yes?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

You're exceedingly fond of this friend of yours!

JOSEPHA.

Yes, I—I am.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

You take her misfortunes very much to heart, at any rate.

JOSEPHA.

[*Uneasily.*] Oh, well—[*Lowering her eyes under* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE'S *gaze and rising*] it is rough on her, isn't it? [*There is another pause. JOSEPHA plays awkwardly with her fingers.*] Oh, I—I've left a ring upstairs.

[*She makes a movement towards the door in the centre.* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *intercepts her.*

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Quietly.*] Tell me, dear, when did you receive the letter?

JOSEPHA.

F-from——?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

From Milly.

JOSEPHA.

[*Promptly.*] This morning.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

This morning? Then you have known all day——?

JOSEPHA.

[*Hurriedly.*] What am I saying? I mean the second post.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

That's the one o'clock post?

JOSEPHA.

Y-yes?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

But you were as merry as a cricket during the afternoon. And now, quite suddenly——

JOSEPHA.

[*Boldly.*] I didn't open the letter.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Didn't open it?

JOSEPHA.

No; I threw it unopened into my dressing-table drawer. I kept it to read later on.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Raising her eyebrows.*] No curiosity, eh?

JOSEPHA.

I'd no idea it contained what it did. How could I have had! [*Smiling politely.*] Any further questions, Mrs. Hebblethwaite?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Oh, my dear, don't think me rude. [BRABNER *enters at the door in the centre carrying some London evening newspapers which he proceeds to arrange upon the round table. Taking advantage of the interruption, JOSEPHA passes MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE and, very softly, goes out at the door on the left. MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE stands for a moment contemplating, with an unsatisfied air, the door at which JOSEPHA has disappeared and then turns to BRABNER and watches his operations thoughtfully.*] Are there three posts then, Brabner?

BRABNER.

No, m'm. The evenin' papers are dropped out at Tollshunt by the train that runs through at six fifty-seven. The porter brings 'em up to the house.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Slowly moving to the fireplace.*] Brabner.

BRABNER.

Yes, m'm?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Miss Quarendon and I have been having a discussion about a letter which she received to-day.

BRABNER.

To-day, m'm? By 'and?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

No; by post. She can't recollect whether it came by the early morning post or by the post which gets here shortly before lunch.

BRABNER.

Miss Josey must be making a mistake, m'm.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

A mistake?

BRABNER.

Miss Josey's *had* no letters to-day, m'm, by the post; neither to-day nor yesterday.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Facing him, insinuatingly.*] Now, Brabner, how can you possibly know?

BRABNER.

[*Going to the door.*] The letters are always delivered at the tradesmen's door, m'm, and I sort them myself in the 'ousekeeper's room.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

I've misunderstood Miss Josey, Brabner, evidently.

BRABNER.

Yes, m'm. [MYRTLE, *dressed most unbecomingly, has*

come down the stairs and now enters at the door in the centre. BRABNER, *in leaving, nearly falls over her.* I beg your pardon, missy.

MYRTLE.

[*Ruffled.*] Careless! [BRABNER *departs, closing the door.*] Where's Josepha?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE

[*Crossing to the right, endeavouring to preserve a calm demeanour.*] She was here a moment since.

MYRTLE.

Is she better?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Sharply.*] Better?

MYRTLE.

She wasn't at all herself an hour or two ago.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

She looks out of sorts still.

MYRTLE.

[*Shrugging her shoulders.*] I can't guess what ails her.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

She says she's had an upsetting letter.

MYRTLE.

[*Peevishly.*] Oh, it isn't any letter, great-aunt.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Eagerly.*] No?

MYRTLE.

[*Sitting in the arm-chair by the fauteuil-stool, and tugging at a wrinkled stocking.*] I fancy she has injured her face in some way.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Coming to MYRTLE.*] Injured her face?

MYRTLE.

Yes. After I'd laid down for a little while this afternoon, I thought I'd go along to her room and resume an argument we had engaged in before tea.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Well?

MYRTLE.

And when I opened her door I found her laving her face in a basin full of water, and then rubbing it as though she'd tear the skin off.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Yes—yes?

MYRTLE.

I said, "What's the matter, Josepha?"; and she burst out crying. I had to speak quite sternly to her.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

The—injury——?

MYRTLE.

Then she resumed her scouring, saying "Oh! Oh! Oh! I shall never get my lips nice again, Myrtle; never!"

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Her lips!

MYRTLE.

Lips.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Her *lips*!

MYRTLE.

[*Rolling her head from side to side.*] Tsch! Isn't my enunciation distinct, great-aunt?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Walking about in agitation.*] Oh, don't keep on calling me great-aunt, child; you make me feel so stout! [*Halting.*] What then?

MYRTLE.

Oh, then she requested me to leave her to herself; and as it is not my practice to bestow my presence where it is not wholly acceptable——

[*HEBBLETHWAITE has come downstairs and now enters at the door in the centre.*]

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Ha, old lady! Glad to see *you're* down. [*Closing the door.*] Punctual for once, hey? Ha, ha, ha! I'm as hungry as a hunter. [*To MYRTLE.*] Going to make a big dinner, Myrtle?

MYRTLE.

[*Rising.*] I shall eat sufficient, great-uncle.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Sufficient! [*Chuckling.*] So shall I, I promise you.

MYRTLE.

[*Squatting before the fire and stretching out her hands to the blaze.*] But I eat to live; I don't live to eat.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Ho, ho, ho!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Standing by the settee on the right—in a strange voice.*] Alfred.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Going to her.*] Hey?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Gutturally.*] When we went upstairs after tea—Lottie, Dulcie, Miss Quarendon, and I—what became of all you men?

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Oh, we spread about.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Glancing at MYRTLE.*] Sssh!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

I had a chat with St. John and then joined Stulkeley in the library.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

How long were you there?

HEBBLETHWAITE.

H'm—quarter-of-an-hour or so.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE,

And afterwards?

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Rubbing his chin.*] What did I do?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Breathing heavily.*] Did—did Miss Quarendon come downstairs again?

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Miss Josey?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Miss Quarendon!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Surprised at her manner.*] Why?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Never mind why. I've a reason for asking.
[*Fiercely.*] Alfred——!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Disconcerted.*] Ye-ye-ye-yes, I believe she did.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

You believe!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

In fact, I—er—I—er——

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Ah! You *know* she did!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Corry!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Faintly.*] Oh, no, no! [*Sitting upon the settee behind her.*] You couldn't—you couldn't be so wicked!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Wicked!

[*MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE sinks back, closing her eyes, and HEBBLETHWAITE stares at her in dismay. WOODHOUSE and LORING have come down the stairs and now enter. They appear to be on excellent terms, and LORING has recovered his spirits. MYRTLE scrambles to her feet and retires to the further settee, where she sits stiffly.*

WOODHOUSE.

[*To LORING.*] That's understood, then, my dear Mr. Loring.

LORING.

A bargain.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE, in an undertone.*] Corry, don't be stupid.

WOODHOUSE.

[*To LORING.*] And you'll drop me a line to 100 St. James's Street?

LORING.

[*Assentingly.*] A reg'lar night of it, hey!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] What's taken you?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Moving to the fireplace, followed by LORING.*] Her Grace is really a remarkable artist——

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Corry—Corry——

WOODHOUSE.

And the shock of seeing her exhibit herself in a music-hall gives you quite an agreeable sensation in the spine.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Mopping his brow with his handkerchief.*] Ph-e-e-w!
[*MRS. PANMURE and DULCIE have come down the stairs and now enter. MRS. PANMURE is dressed in black and on her breast is pinned the badge of the Guild of Fine Souls. MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE opens her eyes and, with a jerk, sits upright as HEBBLETHWAITE turns to MRS. PANMURE and DULCIE with an assumption of cheerfulness.*] Ah, my dears! Charming gowns you're

wearing. You look amazingly handsome in black, Lottie.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Humbly.*] I love black; but with no thought of looking *handsome* in it, uncle.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Discovering the badge.*] Hallo! What's that? That's a pretty thing.

MRS. PANMURE.

Didn't you notice it last night? It's the badge of a guild I belong to.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Putting on his pince-nez.*] A guild?

DULCIE.

The Guild of Fine Souls, uncle Alfred.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Examining the badge.*] O'ho?

MRS. PANMURE.

Instituted by the dear rector of Polehampton—Mr. Pruyn.

DULCIE.

Lottie is the first member.

MRS. PANMURE.

And a most unworthy one.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Who has come forward.*] Guild of Fine Souls!
[*Flippantly.*] Oh, no, not actually! [MRS. PANMURE
turns her eyes upon him.] What are the qualifications
for membership?

MRS. PANMURE.

[*In meek reproof.*] Modesty and humility are among
them, Mr. Woodhouse.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Abashed.*] Oh—ah—[*rejoining LORING at the fire-
place*] I fear I am not eligible.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

A heart, isn't it?

DULCIE.

And a pair of wings sprouting from it.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Gold?

MRS. PANMURE.

No; gilt.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Who has regained her composure, stonily.*] There
are two ways of spelling "gilt."

[HEBBLETHWAITE, MRS. PANMURE *and* DULCIE
turn to her.

MRS. PANMURE.

'Two ways, auntie?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

G-u-i-l-t is one of them.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Apprehensively.*] Corry——

MRS. PANMURE.

Auntie dear ! [HEBBLETHWAITE *hastily crosses to the fireplace and engages* WOODHOUSE *and* LORING *in conversation.*] Aren't you feeling well ?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Fairly, Lottie ; thank you.

DULCIE.

[*Unfolding a newspaper at the round table.*] Ha, ha ! Because aunt Corisande indulges in a harmless little pun, she is accused of being indisposed.

[PANMURE *has come downstairs and now enters. He casts a glance round the room, not altogether free from anxiety, and then approaches* MRS. PANMURE.

PANMURE.

Not late, I hope ?

MRS. PANMURE.

No, dear.

PANMURE.

[*Reassured, drawing* MRS. PANMURE *away from* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *and affording her a glimpse of a manuscript of several sheets which is in his breast.*

pocket.] I stayed in my dressing-room till the last moment, polishing this up.

MRS. PANMURE.

Is that your——?

PANMURE.

[*Nodding.*] My discourse for to-night.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*A note of severity in her voice.*] I sincerely trust, St. John——

PANMURE.

Oh, you need have no misgivings, my dear Lottie. [*Tapping his breast-pocket.*] Though I say it, who perhaps oughtn't to——

MRS. PANMURE.

What is your subject?

PANMURE.

Guess. [*She shakes her head.*] Three shots! [*She reflects.*] A dozen, and I bet you don't hit the bottle.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Gently.*] St. John!

PANMURE.

[*In a tone of triumph.*] Lottie——!

MRS. PANMURE.

Eh?

PANMURE.

What price St. Polycarp!

MRS. PANMURE.

St. Polycarp!

PANMURE.

Yes; I'm giving you a concise history of the dear old—of the—er—of the aged bishop from the word go.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Her eyes sparkling.*] Why, to-day is——!

PANMURE.

Exactly. I've had the scheme in my head for a long while.

MRS. PANMURE.

Scheme?

PANMURE.

Whenever my sermon falls due on a saint's day——

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Pressing his hand stealthily.*] Ah!

PANMURE.

My dear Lottums, I shouldn't be ashamed if Pruyn himself heard me to-night; b'George, I shouldn't.

[*STULKELEY has come down the stairs and now enters.* PANMURE joins the men at the fireplace.

STULKELEY.

A thousand apologies! [*To MRS. PANMURE.*] Have I kept you waiting?

MRS. PANMURE.

No. [*Looking round the room.*] You are not even the last. [*STULKELEY joins the group at the fireplace.*] Where is Miss Quarendon? [*Seeing MYRTLE.*] Ah, Myrtle darling, what have you done with Josey?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

My impression is she is in the morning-room.

MYRTLE.

[*Opening the door on the left and calling.*] Josepha—
—Josepha—

[*MYRTLE goes into the next room as BRABNER enters at the door in the centre.*]

BRABNER.

Dinner is served.

[*BRABNER unbolts and opens the other half of the double-door as MYRTLE reappears with JOSEPHA.*]

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Dear me! How white poor Josey looks!

DULCIE.

[*Overhearing MRS. PANMURE.*] Ghastly.

MRS. PANMURE.

What's the cause of it ?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To MRS. PANMURE and DULCIE—rising.*] I think I can tell you. [*Summoning DULCIE to her.*] Dulcie—
[*DULCIE comes to the back of the settee on the right.*] Lottie—girls—the devil is in this house.

MRS. PANMURE *and* DULCIE.

The devil !

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

In the shape of a man.

DULCIE.

What man ?

MRS. PANMURE.

Which man ?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

That we have to find out.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Scared.*] Oh, but, auntie——

DULCIE.

Aunt Corisande !

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

After dinner.

MRS. PANMURE *and* DULCIE.

Oh—— !

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

After dinner. [*To* MRS. PANMURE, *firmly*.] In the meantime, Lottie, do your duty as hostess.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To* PANMURE, *collecting herself*.] S-S St. John—
St. John——

PANMURE.

[*Turning to her*.] Hallo!

MRS. PANMURE.

T-t-take auntie, please. [PANMURE *advances and gives* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *his arm*.] Mr. Loring—
Dulcie. [LORING, *with a defiant air*, goes to DULCIE. *Averting her head disdainfully*, she keeps him at as great a distance as is possible in the circumstances.]
Uncle, will you bring Miss Quarendon?

[MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE, *who is going out with*
PANMURE, *stutters*.]

PANMURE.

[*To* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.] Hold up, Corry!
Twisted a fetlock?

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To* WOODHOUSE.] Mr. Woodhouse—my little daughter.

[HEBBLETHWAITE *takes* JOSEPHA, WOODHOUSE *takes* MYRTLE. Then MRS. PANMURE *puts her arm through* STULKELEY'S *and the curtain falls. It rises again almost immediately, showing the room in semi-darkness.*

After a pause, KITTS enters at the door in the centre and switches on the lights and mends the fire. While he is at the fireplace, the ladies return from the dining-room.—MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE entering with MRS. PANMURE; DULCIE, MYRTLE, and JOSEPHA following. MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE, MRS. PANMURE, and JOSEPHA sit—MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE upon the settee on the right, MRS. PANMURE at the round table, and JOSEPHA on the settee at the back. MYRTLE and DULCIE remain standing—the former talking to JOSEPHA, DULCIE beside MRS. PANMURE.

DULCIE.

[Her eyes flashing with suppressed excitement.] That will do, Kitts. Get out!

KITTS.

Yes, miss.

[He withdraws at the door on the left. DULCIE whispers into MRS. PANMURE'S ear.]

MRS. PANMURE.

[Turning to JOSEPHA.] Josey dear.

JOSEPHA.

Yes, Lottie?

MYRTLE.

[To MRS. PANMURE, annoyed.] I am talking to Josepha, mother.

MRS. PANMURE.

Josey, dear, will you and darling Myrtle play your duets on the morning-room piano? We shall hear you quite clearly.

MYRTLE.

I am disinclined for music to-night.

MRS. PANMURE.

Myrtle!

JOSEPHA.

[*Who has risen.*] Oh, Myrtle, what does it feel like to be so ungracious?

MYRTLE.

[*Tartly.*] Very pleasant.

JOSEPHA.

[*Leading her to the door on the left.*] Come, Myr.

MYRTLE.

[*To everybody.*] A more constrained and uncomfortable dinner I have seldom assisted at.

JOSEPHA.

Myr—Myr——

MYRTLE.

This is the climax of a most depressing evening.

[*JOSEPHA and MYRTLE go out, leaving the door open.*]

DULCIE.

[*In a low voice, to MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Well!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To Mrs. Hebblethwaite.*] Auntie?

DULCIE.

Make haste, aunt Corisande!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Diving for her handkerchief.*] Ch-child-ren——

DULCIE.

[*Impatiently.*] Oh, my goodness!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Children, the devil is in our midst.

DULCIE.

Yes, yes; you've informed us of that.

MRS. PANMURE.

In a man's shape, you say?

DULCIE.

How does it concern Josepha?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Wiping her eyes.*] Lottie—Dulcie—Miss Quarendon has been kissed.

DULCIE.

Kissed!

MRS. PANMURE.

Josey has!

DULCIE.

When—where?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

This afternoon—in this house—made love to scandalously.

[*JOSEPHIA and MYRTLE strike up a duet. At the same moment, BRABNER and KITTS enter at the centre door with coffee and liqueurs. MRS. PANMURE'S hand is so unsteady that she upsets her coffee-cup.*

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Feebly.*] I'm sorry. [*Declining.*] No coffee.

[*BRABNER comes to MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE and the same accident occurs.*

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Oh! How clumsy I am! [*Declining.*] No coffee.

[*KITTS brings the liqueurs to MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE and she waves him away. BRABNER carries the coffee tray to DULCIE who, with a shaky hand, attempts to take a cup and fails.*

DULCIE.

[*Putting her hands behind her back with great dignity.*] Thank you; no coffee. [*BRABNER and KITTS are going out at the door on the left when she calls to KITTS.*] Kitts! [*KITTS returns.*] You pour me out a liqueur of brandy, [*pointing to the table behind the settee by the fireplace*] and put it down on that table without spilling any.

[KITTS does so and then follows BRABNER into the next room. DULCIE closes the door carefully after KITTS, killing the sound of the music.

MRS. PANMURE.

[To MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.] Oh, auntie!

DULCIE.

[To MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.] Who has done it?

MRS. PANMURE.

Who is he?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

I've told you, that is what we have to get at.

DULCIE.

[Advancing.] But how do you know——?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

I've heard it from her own lips. Her lips! [*Rising and crossing to the left where she walks about.*] She has been kissed on the lips.

MRS. PANMURE.

The lips!

DULCIE,

[To MRS. PANMURE.] Don't be silly. Men don't kiss girls on their noses. [To MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.] Heard it from *her*?

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Rising.*] From Josepha herself?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Joining the others in the middle of the room.*] I was sitting here, dressed for dinner, reading a book—"Beauties of English Country Life"—and she popped her head in at the door. She had been looking for me—wanted my advice——

MRS. PANMURE.

Advice?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

She'd had a letter to-day from a friend—Miss Milly Something-or-other—a governess like herself, who'd been kissed, violently, by a man in the house. No details were given. Her friend simply wished to be advised as to whether she could continue in her situation decently, holding her tongue.

MRS. PANMURE.

But what has this to do with Josepha?

DULCIE.

Shut up, Lottie!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Oh, I saw through it all in a moment. She was shaking from head to foot, and her colour—you remarked her colour——!

MRS. PANMURE.

You didn't charge *her* with being the girl?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

I was hinting at it when Brabner brought in the papers, and she crept out. Then I pumped Brabner. Miss Quarendon has received no letter to-day; and she was as jolly as a sand-boy till we all went upstairs after tea!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Confused.*] After tea?

DULCIE.

[*Her mind working.*] After tea!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

And then in came Myrtle, inquiring for her. Earlier in the evening the child had been to Miss Josey's room and discovered the young lady in tears and scrubbing her face. Myrtle asked what was wrong, and the reply was, "Oh, I shall never get my lips nice again; never!"

DULCIE.

Oh, that fixes it!

MRS. PANMURE.

Horrible!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Moving to the fireplace.*] Infamous!

DULCIE.

[*To Mrs. Panmure.*] Now I hope you're satisfied!

MRS. PANMURE.

Satisfied!

DULCIE.

Bringing this person to The Clewers!

MRS. PANMURE.

There is nothing in this against Josey!

DULCIE.

Nothing! Do you believe that a man ever kisses a girl—! However, we won't discuss that. [*To Mrs. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Did Miss Quarendon come down again, I wonder, after the lot of us went upstairs together?

MRS. PANMURE.

Yes.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Yes.

MRS. PANMURE.

I came down, myself, at about seven o'clock, to fetch my work, and I found a novel of hers in the morning-room. It wasn't there before tea.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

I've a better piece of evidence than that.

DULCIE.

You have!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Your uncle Alfred—your uncle Alfred—! He—he has admitted to me——!

DULCIE.

[*Opening her eyes.*] Admitted——!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

He has admitted having seen her downstairs after tea. [*Putting her hand to her bosom.*] Oh, Lottie—oh, Dulcie! [*Sinking into the arm-chair by the fauteuil-stool.*] Oh, my dears!

DULCIE.

[*Under her breath.*] Oh-h-h! [*To MRS. PANMURE, in a whisper.*] Crikey!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To DULCIE.*] No, no! [*DULCIE shrugs her shoulders.* MRS. PANMURE *hurries to* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.] Oh, no, auntie!

DULCIE.

[*Also going to* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.] Impossible!

MRS. PANMURE.

She would never have had the effrontery, if uncle Alfred had so far forgotten himself, to come to *you* for advice.

DULCIE.

Oh, she'd have the *cheek* to do anything.

MRS. PANMURE.

Dulcie!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Tearfully.*] My dears, this would not be the first time your uncle has stabbed me to the heart.

DULCIE.

[*Sitting upon the fanteuil-stool.*] No !

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Years ago—at Harrogate—a creature in the hotel
—a hussy with a ridiculous waist——

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Taking Mrs. HEBBLETHWAITE's hand.*] Ah !

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

I walked on to the tennis-court one morning and
confronted them.

DULCIE.

[*With zest.*] What happened ?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Struggling to her feet and walking away to the right.*]
I was fined a shilling for damaging the turf with my
heels.

DULCIE.

[*To Mrs. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] With regard to Miss
Quarendon, you haven't positively accused uncle
Alfred, have you ?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Not yet.

DULCIE.

He isn't the only man here. It does seem rather
unfair, I must say——

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Suddenly.*] Oh!

DULCIE *and* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Turning to her.*] Eh?

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Holding her head.*] Oh-h-h!

DULCIE *and* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Lottie!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Walking about.*] Don't speak to me!

DULCIE *and* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Hastening to her.*] No, no!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Appealingly.*] Please!

DULCIE.

Dear old 'St. John! He never gives her as much as a glance.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

He doesn't dance attendance upon her, handing her plates and dishes.

DULCIE.

Not he!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Lottie, dearest——!

DULCIE.

[*Suddenly.*] Oh!

MRS. PANMURE *and* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Eh?

DULCIE.

Oh-h-h! [*Drawing a deep breath.*] Why, of course!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Of course——?

DULCIE.

[*Bursting into a peal of hard laughter.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha!

MRS. PANMURE *and* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Clinging to her.*] Dulcie!

DULCIE.

Leave me alone! [*Walking about.*] Yes, they've commenced their coaching in good earnest!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Coaching?

DULCIE.

He proposed getting her to give him an hour or two's coaching three days a week! Ha, ha!

MRS. PANMURE.

Dulcie, calm yourself!

DULCIE.

He said he'd make it thoroughly worth her while

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Bewildered.*] I don't understand—

DULCIE.

[*Seizing* MRS. PANMURE *and* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.] Understand *this*, you people! I haven't much use for Hughie——

MRS. PANMURE.

Dulcie!

DULCIE.

But I'm two-and-thirty, and I missed my tip in town; and, such as he is, he's my prize-packet!

MRS. PANMURE.

Dulcie, listen——!

DULCIE.

[*Extending her fingers.*] And if I catch him meddling with any other girl, or any girl meddling with him, I wring her neck! [*Sitting upon the settee on the right.*] Take notice, everybody! I wring her neck!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Feebly.*] Oh, Dulcie—oh, aunt Corisande—how can we be so sinful as to rush at conclusions in this way!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

What are conclusions *for*?

MRS. PANMURE.

It's monstrous of us to credit those nearest and

dearest to us with being capable of this crime; monstrous!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Who is the villain, then?

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Clasping her hands.*] Heaven forgive me if I do an injustice to a stranger within my gates——!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Mr. Stulkeley—Mr. Woodhouse——!

MRS. PANMURE.

They are both bachelors!

DULCIE.

Hughie is a bachelor.

MRS. PANMURE.

An engaged man is hardly a bachelor.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Married men are viler than bachelors.

DULCIE.

[*Starting up.*] Bah! What are we jabbering here for, among ourselves! The thing to do is to have her in.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*In a flutter.*] And interrogate her?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Excitedly.*] Yes, yes, yes; and watch her throat.

MRS. PANMURE.

Her throat!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Her throat. Children, your uncle was robbed of some valuable shirt-studs at Christmas, and we suspected an under-housemaid. The police instructed us not to take our eyes off her throat while she was answering our questions. If she gulped—so——

DULCIE.

She was swallowing a lie!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

It's an infallible test.

MRS. PANMURE.

And *did* she——?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Swallow? Repeatedly.

DULCIE.

[*Vindictively.*] Ah!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

The worst of it was—the little wretch!—she had already swallowed the shirt-studs.

[MRS. PANMURE *makes for the door on the left with uncertain steps. On her way, she picks up the liqueur-glass and puts it to her lips. DULCIE rushes at her.*

DULCIE.

[*Taking the glass from her.*] We are all feeling faint, Lottie.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Taking the glass from DULCIE.*] Thank you.

[MRS. PANMURE *opens the door on the left. The piano is heard again.*

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Calling.*] Josepha——

DULCIE.

[*To MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Christopher Columbus ! Spare me a drop, aunt !

[MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *yields up the glass and sits at the further side of the round table. DULCIE seats herself upon the settee on the right.*

MRS. PANMURE.

Josepha—Myrtle —— ! [*The music ceases and JOSEPHA and MYRTLE appear in the doorway.*] Myrtle darling, I wish you to go to bed.

MYRTLE.

To bed !

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Sitting at the round table.*] Run upstairs at once and ring for Wilson.

MYRTLE.

[*Advancing.*] This is extremely abrupt.

MRS. PANMURE.

It is past nine. [*Holding out her arms to MYRTLE.*] Good night.

MYRTLE.

[*Drawing back.*] No, mother; if you can dispense with ceremony, I can. [*At the door in the centre, haughtily.*] I shall remember this occasion, if I live to be thirty.

[*She departs and ascends the stairs.* JOSEPHA, on tip-toe, is about to follow her.

MRS. PANMURE.

Josepha. [JOSEPHA *halts.*] Pray stay where you are. Sit down. [JOSEPHA *sits, facing the round table, upon the fauteuil-stool.* MRS. PANMURE *softens.*] Oh, Josey dear, is it true?

JOSEPHA.

[*Almost inaudibly.*] True?

MRS. PANMURE.

That you have been—kissed?

JOSEPHA.

K-kissed?

DULCIE.

Oh, Lottie, do be more explicit. Naturally, Miss Quarendon has been kissed——

MRS. PANMURE.

Allow *me*, Dulcie——

DULCIE.

Often and often.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] I mean, by—by some man——

DULCIE.

Well, of course !

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

The devil in disguise !

MRS. PANMURE.

In my house——improperly——

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

This afternoon.

DULCIE.

Since tea.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*After a silence.*] I am waiting for your reply, Josephia.

[*There is a further silence, and then JOSEPHA pulls herself together.*]

JOSEPHA

Ho ! [*Rising.*] Oh, I am perfectly well aware what you are all driving at. [*To MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] I'm very much obliged to you, Mrs. Hebblethwaite. [*Moving about, with a great display of indignation.*] This is too bad ; upon my soul, it is ! It'll be a lesson to me till the end of my life. When next I have a letter from a girl-pal who's got into a bit of a hobble——

MRS. PANMURE.

Josey—Josey dear——

JOSEPHA.

I'm dashed if I go for counsel to a lady who has an amiable and good-natured outside.

MRS. PANMURE.

Josey——

JOSEPHA.

Oh ! To have the whole thing twisted round and distorted ! It's abominable ! That's what it is ; it's abominable !

MRS. PANMURE.

Josey, dear, when did you receive your friend's letter ?

JOSEPHA.

[*Standing at the back of the armchair by the fauteuil-stool.*] I've told Mrs. Hebblethwaite. [*To MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Mrs. Hebblethwaite, didn't I tell you plainly and straightforwardly ?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

By the one o'clock post.

JOSEPHA.

By the second post.

MRS. PANMURE.

To-day?

JOSEPHA.

[*Gulping.*] T-t-to-day.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Under her breath.*] Ah! [*To* MRS. PANMURE *and*
DULCIE, *in a whisper.*] Gulps!

MRS. PANMURE.

Where *is* the letter?

JOSEPHA.

[*Blankly.*] Where *is* it?

MRS. PANMURE.

Will you show it to us?

JOSEPHA.

S-show my friend's confidential letter!

MRS. PANMURE.

Under a strict pledge of secrecy. [*A pause.*] Will you show it to *me*? [*A pause.*] You can trust *me*, Josey.

JOSEPHA.

Oh, I—I know I can, Lottie; but I—[*Gulping.*]
I've destroyed it.

[MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE nudges MRS. PANMURE
and signals to DULCIE.]

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] Destroyed it?

JOSEPHA.

Torn it up. You don't keep a letter of that sort
by you.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Solemnly.*] Josepha.

JOSEPHA.

Yes?

MRS. PANMURE.

You have *had* no letter to-day.

JOSEPHA.

In-indeed?

MRS. PANMURE.

No; according to Brabner.

JOSEPHA.

Brabner! Brabner!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Neither to-day nor yesterday.

JOSEPHA.

Ho! Clever old Brabner! So he has been brought

into it, has he? [*Facing* MRS. PANMURE.] I say, Lottie, this isn't exactly playing the game.

MRS. PANMURE.

The game?

JOSEPHA.

To turn on a servant to help hound-down the poor governess!

MRS. PANMURE.

Josey!

JOSEPHA.

Only he forgets one thing, the ancient, faithful domestic! He forgets that I may have met Shepperd, the postman, in the drive, and taken my letter from him.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Gladly, glancing at the others.*] Ah, yes!

JOSEPHA.

Ha, ha, ha!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

It can easily be ascertained whether that was so or not.

DULCIE.

By referring to Shepperd.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

To-morrow.

MRS. PANMURE.

Oh, but surely we can accept Josepha's word——

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To* MRS. PANMURE.] I should like to put a question to Miss Quarendon, Lottie.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To* JOSEPHA.] Josey——?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To* JOSEPHA.] Did you come downstairs again this afternoon, Miss Quarendon——?

DULCIE.

After tea.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

After we had all gone to our rooms——?

DULCIE.

Leaving the men here together.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To* JOSEPHA.] Josepha?

JOSEPHA.

[*Boldly.*] No.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

No?

JOSEPHA.

[*Gulping.*] No, I did not.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Faintly.*] Oh, dear!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] I grieve to have to inform you, Miss Quarendon, that this doesn't tally with certain facts which have come to our knowledge.

DULCIE.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] You were *seen* downstairs after tea.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Holding her heart.*] By my—by Mr. Hebblethwaite.

JOSEPHA.

If—if Mr. Hebblethwaite declares that he saw me, he—[*gulping*] he is labouring under a delusion.

[MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *again makes signs to*
MRS. PANMURE *and* DULCIE, *agitatedly.*

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] I have found a book of yours, Josepha—a novel—in the morning-room. It wasn't there before we all moved upstairs.

JOSEPHA.

S-somebody must have left it there, Lottie.

DULCIE.

Ha!

JOSEPHA.

Ah, yes; it must be the book I lent yesterday.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Lent?

DULCIE.

To whom?

MRS. PANMURE.

To whom, Josey?

JOSEPHA.

[*Wildly.*] I—I decline to answer.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Ah!

JOSEPHA.

I won't—I won't be treated any longer as if I were a dishonest kitchen-maid. Lottie——!

MRS. PANMURE.

Josepha, darling Myrtle has given my aunt an account of what she heard and witnessed when she went to your bedroom this evening.

JOSEPHA.

M-Myrtle!

MRS. PANMURE.

My innocent child.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] Bathing your face and rubbing it as though you would remove the skin!

JOSEPHA.

What! Can't I wash my face in this house without its being used against me!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

And crying out, "I shall never get my lips nice again!"

JOSEPHA.

[*Under her breath.*] Oh!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

"I shall never get my lips nice again; never!"

[*There is a pause, during which JOSEPHA is quite still, and then MRS. PANMURE rises and goes to her.*

MRS. PANMURE.

Josepha, look me in the eyes. How do you explain that?

JOSEPHA.

[*In a low voice.*] I—I can't explain it, Lottie.

MRS. PANMURE.

You—you have been lying to us?

[*JOSEPHA slowly draws the back of her hand across her mouth.*

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE and DULCIE.

[*Rising.*] Ah!

[*HEBBLETHWAITE enters at the door in the centre followed by LORING and, after a while, by PANMURE. JOSEPHA moves to the fireplace and MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE comes to DULCIE.*

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[To MRS. PANMURE.] Lottie, my dear, Mr. Stulkeley begs you to excuse him for half-an-hour; so does Mr. Woodhouse. They've shut themselves up in the library.

LORING.

Beastly fag, politics! Just fancy Stulkeley grindin' away at his speech for to-morrow on top of such a rippin' dinner!

MRS. PANMURE.

[To HEBBLETHWAITE.] Uncle——

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Eh?

LORING.

Best saddle o' mutton I've ever tasted.

MRS. PANMURE.

[To LORING.] Mr. Loring——

LORING.

Your cook *does* jug a hare too, Mrs. Panmure. Er——pardon?

MRS. PANMURE.

Will you go into the next room for a few minutes?

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Surprised.*] Next room?

LORING.

Nex' room?

MRS. PANMURE.

You will find some views of Switzerland there, in an album.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Oh—by all means.

LORING.

[*Not stirring.*] Pleasure.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Gently pushing LORING towards the door on the left*
Come along. [*At the door, to MRS. PANMURE, disturbed.*]
I—I hope——

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Joining MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE and DULCIE.*] Don't ask me now, uncle. [*HEBBLETHWAITE and LORING withdraw. As they disappear, PANMURE advances with a startled look. Unseen by the ladies, JOSEPHIA faces him quickly and, putting her finger to her lips, makes him a reassuring sign. At the sound of the closing of the door on the left, MRS. PANMURE turns to PANMURE.*]
St. John——

PANMURE.

Wha-wha-what——?

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Steadily.*] St. John dear, something very painful has taken place. [*PANMURE stares at her vacantly.*]
Horribly painful.

PANMURE.

P-painful?

MRS. PANMURE.

I don't say that the smallest blame attaches itself to Miss Quarendon—to Josepha——

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Except for her prevarication.

MRS. PANMURE.

Even that is understandable in the circumstances. But the fact remains that she has been kissed.

DULCIE.

By a man.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Outrageously.

MRS. PANMURE.

Here, this afternoon.

PANMURE.

[*Inarticulately.*] K-k-kissby'r'man?

MRS. PANMURE.

We've got to know of it by the merest accident.

JOSEPHA.

[*Hurriedly.*] Yes, I should like Mr. Panmure to hear how it's all come out. [*Addressing PANMURE.*] I'm not a sneak. No, I'm not a sneak. I never meant to cause this trouble. But—idiot that I am!—I went to Mrs. Hebblethwaite and laid the case

before her, pretending I was seeking advice on behalf of a girl-friend.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Sarcastically.*] Miss Milly!

JOSEPHA.

Ha, ha! Oh, I did make a hash of it, Mr. Panmure. Mrs. Hebblethwaite tumbled to the truth almost at once. And then Myrtle gave away something I'd blurted out to her in my bedroom; and after dinner Lottie and Mrs. Hebblethwaite and Miss Anstice bowled me over completely. Oh, I could knock my head against the wall for my stupidity! [*To the ladies, defiantly.*] After all, what is a kiss!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Oh!

MRS. PANMURE.

Josey!

DULCIE.

[*To MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Did you ever——!

JOSEPHA.

A kiss! Pah! I've been kicking up a tremendous fuss about nothing. I was flustered at the moment; but it was simply a bit of fun.

MRS. PANMURE, MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE, *and* DULCIE.

Fun!

. JOSEPHA.

On the part of—the—the—the other person. And look here! I recognise that I'm in disgrace, though

Lottie's kind enough to let me down lightly. So be it! I leave The Clewers to-morrow—early to-morrow. I'd be off to-night if it wasn't still snowing. And there's an end of the business. [*Going to* MRS. PANMURE.] Good-bye, Lottie. [*Chokingly.*] S-s-sorry. I sha'n't try to see you in the morning——

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Sternly.*] Josepha!

JOSEPHA.

Y-yes?

MRS. PANMURE.

I am shocked at you.

JOSEPHA.

S-s-shocked?

MRS. PANMURE.

Such levity! Do you imagine the matter can be passed over in this manner? [JOSEPHA *sinks down on to the futeuil-stool.* MRS. PANMURE *goes to* PANMURE, *who has retreated to the back and is standing there with a relaxed body and an expressionless face.*] St. John——

PANMURE.

[*Straightening himself and speaking in a thick voice.*] Hallo!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Touching his sleeve, trustingly.*] You—you are master of this house.

PANMURE.

B-b-b'George, yes!

MRS. PANMURE.

The affair is in your hands. I cannot—I will not—go to my bed to-night till you have ascertained who it is who has committed this gross impropriety.

[JOSEPHA suddenly sits upright with a determined air.

DULCIE.

I should think not, indeed!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Bed!

DULCIE.

Bed!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Motioning* PANMURE towards JOSEPHA.] St. John——

[*There is a pause and then PANMURE approaches JOSEPHA with painful deliberation.*

PANMURE.

M-m-miss Quarendon.

JOSEPHA.

Well?

PANMURE.

You—you—you hear what Lottie—what Mrs. Panmure says?

JOSEPHA.

I'm not deaf.

PANMURE.

V-v-very good. V-v-very good. Now, attend to

me. [*Loosening his shirt-collar.*] Attend to me. Who—*who—who* is the feller?

JOSEPHIA.

[*Raising her head and looking at him fixedly.*] Nothing on earth would induce me to split on him.

PANMURE.

H-h-hey?

JOSEPHIA.

Nothing in the wide world.

PANMURE.

[*Gaining courage.*] M-m-miss Quarendon, d-d-d-do you d-d-dare to—to sit there and—and—and—and treat me with defiance?

JOSEPHIA.

Absolute defiance.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Oh, St. John!

PANMURE.

[*Blusteringly.*] I—I—I demand—I demand the feller's name. [*Hitting the palm of his hand with his fist.*] I demand it.

[*MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE and DULCIE draw nearer.*

JOSEPHIA glances at them.

JOSEPHIA.

If you stand over me till daybreak, every one of you, you won't succeed in getting anything out of me.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Going to Mrs. PANMURE.*] Really, Lottie!

DULCIE.

[*Walking away to the back.*] Charming!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Advancing and coming between JOSEPHA and PANMURE.*] Josepha—Josepha——

PANMURE.

[*Wiping his brow.*] Defied, b'George! Defied, under my own roof!

MRS. PANMURE.

Josepha, you don't seem to see the consequences of the attitude you are taking up.

JOSEPHA.

[*Doggedly.*] Consequences?

MRS. PANMURE.

By shielding the guilty, you are casting suspicion upon the innocent.

PANMURE.

[*Flourishing his handkerchief.*] Quite so. Cas'piononth'innocent.

MRS. PANMURE.

There are four men in this house—five, if I include my husband——

JOSEPHA.

[*Quickly.*] Mr. Panmure! [*Shrugging her shoulders.*] Ho! Obviously it wasn't Mr. Panmure. [*Rising.*] There! I *have* told you something. [*Deliberately.*] It wasn't— Mr. Panmure. [MRS. PANMURE *turns to PANMURE and, with closed eyes, prints a remorseful kiss upon his cheek; whereupon PANMURE, inflating his chest, moves to the round table and picks up a newspaper.*] And now I'll relieve you of my company.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Coming forward, with DULCIE, on the left.*] Certainly not!

JOSEPHA.

[*To MRS. PANMURE.*] You won't expect me at prayers to-night, will you?

DULCIE.

Lottie!

JOSEPHA.

[*Clinging to MRS. PANMURE.*] Oh, don't let them chive me any more; don't.

MRS. PANMURE.

Josepha dear, nobody wants to chive you, as you rather inelegantly term it. [*Releasing herself.*] But you must perceive that the matter cannot rest here.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] It's not enough, Miss Quarendon, that you should exonerate only Mr. Panmure.

PANMURE.

[*Opening the newspaper impressively.*] No. Why am *I* specially favoured, s'like to know?

DULCIE.

[*To JOSEPHIA.*] As Lottie says, you've got to clear the innocent.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

It's a mere form, perhaps—but—but there is Mr. Hebblethwaite, for instance——

PANMURE.

Yes, there's dear ol' Alfred.

DULCIE.

And Mr. Loring.

PANMURE.

Hughie Loring. Remember him in Eton jackets, b'George!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Gently shaking JOSEPHIA, who is staring before her.*] Josephia.

JOSEPHIA.

[*Dazed.*] Yes, but—if I clear first one—and then another—you—you——

MRS. PANMURE.

We—we——?

JOSEPHIA.

You—you'd arrive at the guilty party.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Precisely.

MRS. PANMURE.

Now, come !

JOSEPHA.

[*Shaking her head.*] No—no.

MRS. PANMURE.

Josepha !

JOSEPHA.

I—I—I can't.

MRS. PANMURE.

Can't ?

JOSEPHA.

I can't.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Can't clear Mr. Hebblethwaite !

DULCIE.

Nor Mr. Loring !

JOSEPHA.

[*Unsteadily.*] I—I'm going to my room.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *and* DULCIE.

Oh —— !

JOSEPHA.

I—I'm going to pack. [*She turns, to find DULCIE standing before the door in the centre and MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE barring her way to the door on the left. She stamps her foot fiercely.*] Get away ! Get away ! [*To DULCIE.*] Get away from that door. [*DULCIE,*

alarmed, retreats to the right and JOSEPHA, uttering indignant cries, opens the centre door.] Ah! Ah!

[She goes out and flies up the stairs.]

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[Coming forward, much discomposed.] Oh, good gracious!

DULCIE.

[Also coming forward, laughing uncomfortably.] Ha, ha, ha!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Oh, what a violent young woman!

DULCIE.

Ha, ha! One doesn't want one's eyes scratched out.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

A perfect fury!

DULCIE.

Ill-conditioned little savage!

MRS. PANMURE.

[To PANMURE, calmly.] St. John——

PANMURE.

H-hallo!

MRS. PANMURE.

[Going to the fireplace.] Josepha Quarendon's anxiety to screen this libertine makes me more determined than ever.

PANMURE.

[*Throwing his newspaper aside with an air of resolve.*]
More'n'ever.

MRS. PANMURE.

The affair *shall* be fathomed.

PANMURE.

Fathomed, b'George!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Turning to him.*] I repeat, the investigation is in your hands. [*Sitting majestically, with folded arms, upon the settee by the fireplace.*] Auntie—Dulcie—we will wait here while St. John examines uncle Alfred and Mr. Loring in the morning-room.

DULCIE.

[*Moving to the right.*] Yes.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Following DULCIE.*] That's the next step.

DULCIE.

That's the next step.

[*DULCIE and MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE seat themselves at the round table as PANMURE slowly makes for the door on the left.*]

PANMURE.

[*Halting in the middle of the room—with a dry mouth.*] L-Lottie.

MRS. PANMURE.

Yes, dear?

PANMURE.

S-s-suppose Alfred and Hughie—both of 'em—suppose they deny it?

MRS. PANMURE.

Then you will have another distressing task to perform, St. John.

PANMURE.

'Nother?

MRS. PANMURE.

In the library.

PANMURE.

Library?

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Looking at him significantly.*] Mr. Stulkeley—Mr. Woodhouse—!

PANMURE.

[*His jaw falling.*] Oh—ah—yes; there's Stulkeley and Woodhouse, ain't there? [*Lingering, dully.*] Stulkeley—and Woodhouse.

MRS. PANMURE.

Go, St. John. [*He makes a movement.*] St. John——

PANMURE.

H-hey?

MRS. PANMURE.

Be firm. [*He nods.*] No matter what it costs you, be firm.

PANMURE.

R-rely on me, Lottie. [*To MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE and DULCIE, swelling himself out again.*] Girls, rely on me.

[*With an important cough, he adjusts his neck-tie, pulls down his waistcoat, and marches to the door of the morning-room. There he pauses, his hand on the door handle, and draws a deep breath. Then he disappears, leaving the three ladies sitting grimly and fixedly.*]

END OF THE SECOND ACT.

THE THIRD ACT

The scene is a library. In the centre of the wall at the back is a fireplace with a fender-stool before it. A bright fire of wood is burning in a dog-grate. In the right-hand wall, a double-door opens into the room from a passage ; and in the wall on the left, directly opposite the double-door, there is a bay-window. Curtains of heavy material are drawn across the opening to the window-recess.

Book-shelves laden with books almost entirely conceal the rest of the walls ; but at the back, between the fireplace and the right-hand wall, there is a single door, light in substance, furnished with dummy books so as to continue the lines of the shelves. This door admits to a small cabinet in which are a wash-stand, a ewer of water, towels, etc., also a dressing-table with a mirror above it. On the table is a set of hair-brushes, under the table a pair of wool-work slippers, and hanging from a peg is a braided smoking-jacket.

A little smoking-table and a capacious arm-chair stand on either side of the fireplace. In the left-hand corner of the room there is a settee, in the right-hand corner a large circular table with newspapers and magazines upon it. Facing the

window are a writing-table and chair, and on the other side of the room a small oblong table and an arm-chair. A writing-case containing papers is on the oblong table.

The room is lighted by shaded lights in sconces and by a lamp on the writing-table.

[WOODHOUSE, pen in hand, is seated at the writing-table. Some sheets of writing-paper, covered with notes, are before him. STULKELEY is standing with his back to the fire, dictating.]

STULKELEY.

[*Stroking his brow.*] Let me see ; let me see. What shall I touch upon next ?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Yawning.*] Oh-h-h-h ! Pig-iron ?

STULKELEY.

No, no ; Hebbblethwaite is dealing with pig-iron. He's splendid on pig-iron !

WOODHOUSE.

I really shouldn't have given him pig-iron, if I'd been you, Reggie. We're not at all bad on pig-iron.

STULKELEY.

[*Ignoring WOODHOUSE's comment.*] Ah, yes, yes ; the duties already existing on imported food !

WOODHOUSE.

Not again ! We fed 'em with that to-day at Shobdon.

STULKELEY.

My dear fellow, do remember that a harp has only a certain number of strings. [*Dictating.*] "Taxation of food and other necessities of life no new thing." [*Softly, as WOODHOUSE writes.*] No new thing—no new thing——

WOODHOUSE.

[*Writing.*] "——no new thing."

STULKELEY.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] Enumerate the various articles of taxed food.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Writing, wearily.*] "Sugar—tea——"

STULKELEY.

[*Beginning to share WOODHOUSE's fatigue.*] "Figs—plums—prunes——"

WOODHOUSE.

[*Writing.*] "Figs—plums—prunes——"

STULKELEY.

"Raisins—cocoa——" [*Breaking off.*] Cocoa!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Writing.*] "Raisins—cocoa—coffee—currants—chicory."

STULKELEY.

Isn't there something I particularly wished to say about cocoa?

WOODHOUSE.

I'm blessed if I know. I'm getting stale on it all, frankly.

STULKELEY.

[*Searching among the contents of the writing-case on the oblong table.*] Cocoa. Where is cocoa?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Leaning back in his chair and staring at the ceiling.*] Damn cocoa!

STULKELEY.

[*Finding a scrap of paper.*] Here it is! "Cocoa." I was sure I had a memorandum on the subject. [*Reading.*] "Instance of scientific protection practised by our opponents." [*Tossing the memorandum back into the writing-case and dictating.*] "Cocoa."

WOODHOUSE.

[*Yawning again.*] Oh-h-h-h! [*Writing.*] "Cocoa."

STULKELEY.

"Instance of s-s-scientific ——" [*Yawning.*] Oh-h-h-h! Your yawning is contagious, my dear Talbot.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Yawning.*] S-s-sorry. [*Writing.*] "—— scientific protection practised by our opponents."

STULKELEY.

[*Yawning.*] "C-c-case of cocoa—oh-h-h!—case of cocoa one of especial interest."

WOODHOUSE.

[*Yawning as he writes.*] “C-c-case of c-c-cocoa——”

STULKELEY.

I think if I plunged my face in a little cold water——

WOODHOUSE.

Excellent idea. [*Rising with alacrity.*] I’ll smoke another cigarette while you’re doing it.

STULKELEY.

[*Taking off his coat.*] I suspect that we are both, more or less, in the throes of indigestion.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Producing his cigarette case.*] A confoundedly stodgy dinner, Reggie!

STULKELEY.

[*Laying his coat upon the arm-chair by the oblong table.*] Very.

WOODHOUSE.

Well-intentioned people—the Panmures——

STULKELEY.

[*Turning up his shirt-cuffs.*] A kindly host and hostess.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Lighting a cigarette.*] But, if the criticism may be allowed, the entire repast was nauseous in the extreme.

STULKELEY.

[*Entering the washing-cabinet and switching on the*

light.] It failed to reach the level of last night, undoubtedly.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Standing before the fire, smoking.*] Last night the cook, whom I picture as an elderly female of opulent physical proportions—last night the cook evidently shot her bolt.

STULKELEY.

[*Pouring water into the basin.*] Not only was the dinner unsatisfactory in a material sense, my dear Talbot, but a curious air of oppression seemed to hang over the table.

WOODHOUSE.

Cause and effect.

STULKELEY.

[*Dousing his face.*] Perhaps.

WOODHOUSE.

The soup was described as mock-turtle. I don't dispute the fidelity of the imitation, but the particular turtle that was mocked must have lived on a diet consisting mainly of glue. Then the cod-fish; woolly as a blanket! And a more underdone fragment of meat than *my* slice of mutton I have never seen off a butcher's board.

STULKELEY.

[*Wiping his face upon a towel.*] Mrs. Panmure was so absent-minded that I could scarcely wring a syllable from her.

WOODHOUSE.

No wonder, poor dear lady!

STULKELEY.

Miss Anstice, too! Last night, quite entertaining.

WOODHOUSE.

I was afflicted, on one side of me, with the companionship of *Miss Panmure*. I really shall communicate with the secretary of the Zoological Society concerning that young person. Nobody but he can classify her with accuracy.

STULKELEY.

[*Appearing in the doorway of the cabinet with a hair-brush.*] Even my fascinating little friend Miss Quarendon had lost some of her usual vivacity.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Affecting indifference.*] Had she?

STULKELEY.

Didn't you notice it? She was on your other side.

WOODHOUSE.

Er—I fancy I did.

STULKELEY.

[*Brushing his hair.*] Still, it's a pleasure to contemplate Miss Quarendon, whether she is talking or is silent.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Shortly.*] Charming girl; charming.

STULKELEY.

[*Lost in meditation.*] Most attractive; m-o-s-t attractive. [WOODHOUSE *frowns in the direction of* STULKELEY, *flings his cigarette into the fire, and walks about impatiently.* STULKELEY *rouses himself and completes the brushing of his hair before the mirror.*] Ha! What an extraordinary coincidence!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Sourly.*] Coincidence?

STULKELEY.

My acquaintance with her delightful old father.

WOODHOUSE.

My dear chap, you said yesterday that you'd only a hazy recollection of old Quarendon.

STULKELEY.

I—er—I've been refreshing my memory.

WOODHOUSE.

Clearly. To-day, you and he appear to have been cronies.

STULKELEY.

[*Switching off the light in the cabinet and emerging.*] You will always exaggerate, Talbot. [*Shutting the door.*] A man may enjoy a tolerably close friendship with another without being exactly a "crony." [*Turning down his shirt-cuffs, coldly.*] However, we won't waste time in discussing the precise terms of my intimacy with Colonel Quarendon. [*Resuming his*

coat.] Shall we get to work again? [WOODHOUSE, *with an ill grace, returns to his seat at the writing-table.*] Where were we?

WOODHOUSE.

Oh, cocoa.

STULKELEY.

[*Taking up his former position at the fireplace.*] Yes, yes; cocoa.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Reading his notes.*] "Case of cocoa—" Case of cocoa—what?

STULKELEY.

Case of cocoa one of especial interest, I think I was going to observe. [*A faint but sharp knocking is heard.* STULKELEY *looks towards the door on the right.*] Come in!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Writing.*] "—one of especial interest."

STULKELEY.

[*Dictating.*] "Now—ah—there is—h'm—there is raw cocoa—and—er—there is manufactured cocoa." [*The knocking is repeated.*] Where is that knocking? [WOODHOUSE *sits up and listens.* *Again the knocking is heard.*] Is it at the window, Talbot? [WOODHOUSE *rises and passes through the curtains hanging across the window-recess.* STULKELEY *murmurs to himself.*] There is raw cocoa—and there is—er—manufactured cocoa.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Out of sight.*] Lor' bless my soul!

JOSEPHA'S VOICE.

Mr. Woodhouse——

WOODHOUSE.

My dear Miss Quarendon !

JOSEPHA'S VOICE.

Is Mr. Stulkeley—— ?

WOODHOUSE.

Quick ! Get in !

[WOODHOUSE *draws one of the curtains aside and JOSEPHA appears, dressed as in the preceding act, with flushed cheeks and a feverish sparkle in her eyes. She has a filmy scarf round her shoulders and there are glistening particles of snow upon the scarf and in her hair.*

JOSEPHA.

[*Breathlessly.*] Oh, dear me ! [*Dropping her skirt.*]
Thank you.

STULKELEY.

[*Advancing to her.*] Miss Quarendon !

JOSEPHA.

I'm afraid I was rather impatient, but it's such a fearful night.

STULKELEY.

You've come through the garden !

JOSEPHA.

Yes. [*Shaking the snow from her hands and arms as*

WOODHOUSE, *after having fastened the window, hurries from behind the curtain.*] I hope I'm not bothering you.

STULKELEY.

Not in the least.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Helping her to unwind her scarf.*] Permit me.

STULKELEY.

[*Getting hold of one end of the scarf.*] I'll shake it.

[*The men each holding an end of the scarf, pull it away from one another.*]

JOSEPHA.

Oh, don't tear my lovely scarf!

[WOODHOUSE secures the scarf and proceeds to shake it vigorously in the left-hand corner of the room.]

STULKELEY.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] Are your shoes wet?

JOSEPHA.

[*Looking down at her toes.*] Nothing to speak of. I ran like mad till I got to the verandah. [STULKELEY has produced his handkerchief and is flicking her hair with it.] Thank you, thank you, so much. [WOODHOUSE throws the scarf upon the settle and joins in the operation.] The snow must be seven or eight inches deep in some places. It isn't going to lie, though. There are signs of a drizzle already. [*One of the handkerchiefs flicks her eye.*] Oh!

STULKELEY.

My dear Talbot!

WOODHOUSE.

My dear Reggie!

STULKELEY.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] I beg your pardon.

WOODHOUSE.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] Which of us did it?

JOSEPHA.

[*Blinking.*] All right; it doesn't matter.

STULKELEY.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] Make up the fire. [*To JOSEPHA.*]
Come to the fire.

JOSEPHA.

The fire! I'm burning as it is. [*Going to the chair by the oblong table and then turning to address STULKELEY.*] I dare say you are awfully surprised at my intruding myself upon you in this way.

STULKELEY.

There can be no question of intruding.

JOSEPHA.

No, but blowing in at the window as if I were a microbe!

STULKELEY.

Well, I—I confess I——

JOSEPHA.

[*Earnestly.*] I'll tell you. I don't want my visit to you to be known. It mustn't be known. So, to avoid being seen by any one, I crept down the servants' staircase and let myself out at the tradesmen's door and sprinted through the grounds.

STULKELEY.

[*Raising his eyebrows.*] Can you get back without being discovered?

JOSEPHA.

[*With a shrug and a wan smile.*] With luck. All life is luck, it seems to me. [*Indicating the door on the right.*] Do you mind turning the key, in case we should be interrupted?

[WOODHOUSE, *who has replenished the fire, hastens to the door and there pauses.*

WOODHOUSE.

[*To STULKELEY, reluctantly.*] Er—shall I—er——?

JOSEPHA.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] Oh, no, please don't; there's no necessity for that. In fact, I—I think I should prefer your remaining. [WOODHOUSE *locks the door.*] Thank you, *ever* so much. [*To both the men.*] Of course, this is in deadly confidence?

STULKELEY.

[*Moving away to the writing-table.*] My dear child——!

WOODHOUSE.

My dear young lady——!

STULKELEY.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] Pray—pray sit down. [*She sits. WOODHOUSE retires to the fireplace.*] To what do I owe the—ah—the gratification——?

JOSEPHA.

[*Forcing a laugh.*] Ha, ha! The beginning of a job is always the hardest part of it, isn't it? [*Nervously stroking the arm of her chair.*] M-M-Mr. Stulkeley, you—you knew my father.

STULKELEY.

Er—ah—yes. I had that privilege.

JOSEPHA.

And, judging from what you said to me this morning, you feel a certain amount of interest in his daughter.

STULKELEY.

[*Shunning WOODHOUSE'S eye, which is upon him.*] A—er—a very considerable interest.

JOSEPHA.

And that emboldens me to approach you in this unceremonious fashion, and to—to ask a trifling favour of you.

STULKELEY.

I assure you, anything that lies in my power——

JOSEPHA.

[*Meeting his gaze.*] I'm leaving The Clewers tomorrow.

STULKELEY.

Leaving!

JOSEPHA.

Early in the morning.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Ruefully.*] To-morrow morning!

JOSEPHA.

[*To STULKELEY.*] Abrupt, isn't it?

STULKELEY.

It does strike me as somewhat——

JOSEPHA.

I've been upstairs, in my room, collecting my vast possessions; [*dropping her eyes*] and suddenly, in a flash, an inspiration came to me.

STULKELEY.

Inspiration?

JOSEPHA.

I—I'm anxious before I go to smooth out a little difficulty I've got into.

STULKELEY.

Difficulty?

JOSEPHA.

Well, that I've got other people into, is how I ought to put it, I suppose. [*Studying the carpet.*] M-M-Mr. Stulkeley——[*He advances a step or two.*] I—I've been kissed.

STULKELEY.

Kissed ?

JOSEPHA.

[*Nodding.*] This afternoon, by one of the men in the house.

STULKELEY.

Er—objectionably ?

JOSEPHA.

[*Nodding again.*] H'm. The ladies were resting and I was downstairs alone.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Coming forward.*] Good gracious !

JOSEPHA.

It was so unexpected. Before I could wriggle away—[*drawing her hand across her lips*] puh !

WOODHOUSE.

Blackguard !

STULKELEY.

Who is the scoundrel ?

JOSEPHA.

Unfortunately, after giving him my solemn word that I wouldn't blab, I've gone and let it out.

STULKELEY.

To—— ?

JOSEPHA.

To the ladies. You see, I was perplexed as to what

course I ought to follow, and I invented a crammer about its having happened to a girl-friend of mine. And one of the ladies, whose advice I asked, grasped the true state of affairs; and then they all went for me, and I was compelled to own up.

WOODHOUSE.

Serves the brute right!

STULKELEY.

It is impossible to feel the smallest sympathy——

JOSEPHA.

[*Quickly.*] Oh, no; you don't understand me.

STULKELEY.

I understand——

JOSEPHA.

No, no; I haven't revealed the man's name. [*Rising and going to STULKELEY.*] That's what brings me to you. [*Smiling into his face winningly.*] T-t-this is where the inspiration comes in.

STULKELEY.

Ah, yes; the—the inspiration.

JOSEPHA.

[*Bracing herself for an effort.*] M-M-Mr. Stulkeley, it has occurred to me that perhaps you—perhaps you'd be sweet enough to—to oblige me——

STULKELEY.

Oblige you?

JOSEPHA.

B-b-by—by taking it on yourself.

STULKELEY.

Taking it—on myself!

JOSEPHA.

Allowing me to tell the ladies that you did it.

STULKELEY.

[*Horried.*] My dear Miss Quarendon!

JOSEPHA.

Oh, but wait! You don't give me time to explain.

STULKELEY.

I fear, no explanation——

JOSEPHA.

Yes, it will. When I found what a miserable muddle I'd made of things, I declared to the ladies that the whole business had been simply a bit of fun.

STULKELEY.

Fun?

JOSEPHA.

I was foolishly indignant at the moment, I told them, but it had been nothing but a harmless frolic.

STULKELEY.

They didn't believe you?

JOSEPHA.

No, because they're in such a frightful panic over their men-folk. But if you would only let me say that you're the person——

STULKELEY.

[*With a gesture.*] Oh——!

JOSEPHA.

An old friend of my father's!

STULKELEY.

A friend of a young lady's father does not——
ah——

JOSEPHA.

Yes, he *does*. At any rate, he *might*. [*Turning to* WOODHOUSE.] Mightn't he, Mr. Woodhouse? [*Appealingly.*] Mr. Woodhouse!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Judicially.*] Since you do me the honour of soliciting my opinion——

JOSEPHA.

Yes——yes——?

WOODHOUSE.

I can quite conceive that a man of my cousin's age——

STULKELEY.

[*Stiffly.*] My dear Talbot——

JOSEPHA.

[*To STULKELEY.*] Oh, don't stop him!

WOODHOUSE.

[*With a touch of malevolence.*] Considering, too, the remarkable intimacy which apparently existed between him and your late father—— ;

JOSEPHA.

Yes ?

WOODHOUSE.

I repeat, I can quite conceive that, in a semi-parental spirit——

JOSEPHA.

That's it ! That's it ! [*To STULKELEY.*] Parental !

STULKELEY.

My dear Miss Quarendon——

JOSEPHA.

Ah, oblige me !

STULKELEY.

The parental spirit—and I can imagine few forms of affection more beautiful—the parental spirit does not, I submit, incite a man to embrace a young lady, playfully or otherwise, in such a manner as to cause her embarrassment or alarm. [*Bowing.*] I grieve not to be able to fall in with your suggestion. [*Withdrawing to the fireplace.*] Forgive me.

JOSEPHA.

[*Half in petulance, half in distress.*] Oh ! oh ! [*Moving to the writing-table.*] Oh, how disobliging !

STULKELEY.

[*Opening his arms.*] Besides, why on earth should

the actual culprit be treated with so much indulgence? I would spare him no suspense, no agony of mind; not a scintilla.

JOSEPHA.

[*Sitting at the writing-table and, with her elbows upon it, digging her fingers into her hair.*] Oh, dear me! Oh, dear me!

STULKELEY.

Whether he is to be exposed or not, he deserves to be made as uneasy as possible.

JOSEPHA.

Yes, but *all* the men don't deserve to be made uneasy; nor do the women.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Knitting his brows.*] Who are the men?

STULKELEY.

[*Reckoning.*] Mr. Panmure——

JOSEPHA.

[*Turning in her chair hastily.*] Ah, no, it wasn't Mr. Panmure.

STULKELEY.

Not Mr. Panmure.

JOSEPHA.

No; that's just who it *wasn't*. I've cleared *him*.

STULKELEY.

That leaves us Mr.—Mr.——

WOODHOUSE.

Loring.

STULKELEY.

[*Shocked.*] Engaged to Miss Anstice!

WOODHOUSE.

And Hebblethwaite.

STULKELEY.

[*Throwing up his hands.*] Great heavens!

JOSEPHA.

[*To STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE.*] And you twq.

STULKELEY.

Eh?

JOSEPHA.

Mr. Panmure being out of it, it lies between the four of you.

STULKELEY.

[*Blankly.*] The four of us!

WOODHOUSE.

The four of us!

STULKELEY.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] My dear Miss Quarendon!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Going to STULKELEY.*] My dear Reggie!

STULKELEY.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] My dear fellow!

WOODHOUSE.

The four of us !

STULKELEY.

The four of us !

WOODHOUSE.

[*Going to JOSEPHA.*] My dear young lady, whatever pledge may have been extorted from you by this—this—this reptile, surely it is due to those to whom chivalry is not—ah—is not yet a dead letter——

JOSEPHA.

[*Shaking her head.*] No, no ; I can't.

WOODHOUSE.

You can't—— ?

JOSEPHA.

I can't give up the guilty party.

WOODHOUSE.

But you can exculpate——

JOSEPHA.

No ; I won't supply the slightest clue.

WOODHOUSE.

Oh, but really—— !

JOSEPHA.

[*Turning from him.*] Don't ; don't !

WOODHOUSE.

You *must* listen to reason ; you really must.

[*Magnanimously.*] I am thinking more of my cousin Reggie than of myself; I am, positively.

STULKELEY.

[*Walking about on the right, perturbed.*] Nonsense; nonsense!

WOODHOUSE.

A man of his standing—a man in public life! That there should be a question even of his being capable of such a hideous breach of hospitality——!

STULKELEY.

Intolerable!

WOODHOUSE.

Assuming that the affair remains within the area of conjecture, these ladies are bound to gossip.

STULKELEY.

Dreadful!

WOODHOUSE.

And once a scandal of this sort gets wind——

JOSEPHA.

[*Her face suddenly lighting up.*] Ah!

WOODHOUSE.

Eh?

JOSEPHA.

[*Rising and seizing his hand.*] Mr. Woodhouse——!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Startled.*] Y-y-yes?

JOSEPHA.

Will *you* do it?

WOODHOUSE.

What!

JOSEPHA.

Take it on yourself!

WOODHOUSE.

I!

JOSEPHA.

Oh, be sweet to me!

WOODHOUSE.

Sweet!

JOSEPHA.

Oblige me!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Freeing his hand.*] My dear Miss Quarendon!

JOSEPHA.

Chivalry with you isn't a dead letter; you've just said so.

WOODHOUSE.

[*At a loss.*] I—ah—really——

JOSEPHA.

Yes, yes; I quite see that it *would* be a little unfair to saddle it on to Mr. Stulkeley; but you—you're different, aren't you? [*Running across to STULKELEY.*] Mr. Stulkeley—dear Mr. Stulkeley—persuade him! [*Linking her arm in STULKELEY'S.*] Ah!

STULKELEY.

I—er—I have no right, Miss Quarendon, to attempt to put pressure upon Mr. Woodhouse——

JOSEPHA.

Not pressure ; persuasion !

STULKELEY.

[*Releasing himself.*] All that I *am* entitled to do is to express a view—a view which I hold very strongly——

JOSEPHA.

Well !

STULKELEY.

That it would be far less extravagant to credit anything of the nature of an unseemly action to my cousin Talbot than to myself.

JOSEPHA.

[*Turning to* WOODHOUSE.] There !

WOODHOUSE.

Upon my word, Reggie !

JOSEPHA.

[*At* WOODHOUSE'S *side.*] Oblige me ! Oblige me !

WOODHOUSE.

[*Edging away from her.*] I regret—I regret profoundly——

JOSEPHA.

You won't!

WOODHOUSE.

Impossible!

JOSEPHA.

Oh!

WOODHOUSE.

Absolutely impossible! [*Scowling at STULKELEY.*]
Really, my dear Reggie!

[*He retreats in disorder to the fireplace. There is a pause.*]

JOSEPHA.

[*To both the men.*] So—neither of you—? [*They hang their heads.*] Thank you. [*Bitterly.*] How—how disobliging! [*In a dreary voice, the men eyeing her furtively.*] Oh, la, la! I suppose I'd better make another rush for it, and get on with my packing. [*Snatching up her scarf.*] If I'm pounced upon, I don't care. [*Moving to the window.*] I don't care what becomes of me henceforth. [*Halting.*] No, by Jove, I won't go into the house yet awhile! [*To the men, passionately.*] If you look out of the window for the next half-hour, you'll have the pleasure of seeing me tramping steadily to-and-fro in the snow and slush.

STULKELEY.

Miss Quarendon——

WOODHOUSE.

My dear Miss Quarendon——

JOSEPHIA.

Yes, your consciences'll prick you, perhaps, when you realise what you have done. [*Confronting them.*] I mean it! I swear I don't go into the house again till I've caught a jolly good cold on the chest—a fatal one. You watch! To-and-fro, to-and-fro, ankle-deep, and with a bare throat! [*Nodding.*] Farewell to you! [*Rolling her scarf into a ball and flinging it towards the men.*] Here! I sha'n't need that!

[*She passes through the curtains, dropping them behind her, and there is the sound of the opening and the closing of the window. The men stare at each other, dumfounded.*]

STULKELEY.

[*After a silence.*] Talbot.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Dazed.*] Eh!

STULKELEY.

She's not in earnest?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Shutting his eyes.*] I could drink a whiskey-and soda.

STULKELEY.

She can't be in earnest, Talbot!

WOODHOUSE.

As a rule, it's a drink I detest——

STULKELEY.

Go—go and look. [WOODHOUSE *vanishes through the curtains*. STULKELEY *picks up the scarf and unconsciously presses it to his bosom*. Presently WOODHOUSE *reappears*.] W-well?

WOODHOUSE.

I can't see her.

STULKELEY.

She's not fulfilling her threat!

WOODHOUSE.

Evidently.

[*They breathe more freely*. STULKELEY *sits in the chair by the oblong table with assumed composure*.]

STULKELEY.

She—she meant merely to frighten us.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Coming to STULKELEY and standing over him*.] Reggie, let this be a lesson to you. Never depart from the strict truth in order to gain an advantage over a pal.

STULKELEY.

[*Haughtily*.] I—I don't —

WOODHOUSE.

It's my firm conviction that your acquaintance with old Quarendon is pure romance, devised to ingratiate yourself with a pretty gal. We owe Miss Josey's infernal inspiration to *you*.

STULKELEY.

[*Rising with great dignity.*] My dear Talbot, to instruct you in the elementary principles of logic is a task for which I have neither leisure nor inclination ; but a moment's reflection should convince even a man of untrained intelligence that Miss Quarendon's regrettable impulse arose primarily from no act of mine, but from the circumstance of her having been annoyed this afternoon by an amorous ruffian. [*Turning to the writing-case and cramming the scarf into it.*] Er—look out once more.

[WOODHOUSE goes to the curtains and peeps through them.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Leaving the window.*] Nothing .

STULKELEY.

We will resume our work at the point at which we were disturbed.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Thoroughly out of temper.*] Cocoa !

STULKELEY.

Cocoa. [STULKELEY returns to the fireplace as WOODHOUSE reseats himself at the writing-table.] Where—— ?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Examining his notes angrily.*] We'd got to some piffle about the raw stuff and the manufactured.

STULKELEY.

Yes, yes. [*Dictating.*] "There is raw cocoa and there is manufactured cocoa."

WOODHOUSE.

Tsch! [*As he writes.*] We should have been much better off—if we'd quartered ourselves—at a beastly inn—in the beastly town. [*Writing.*] "—manufactured cocoa."

STULKELEY.

[*Dictating.*] "Both are taxed under the present system."

WOODHOUSE.

[*As he writes.*] I loathe a psalm-singing household. You mark me—Mother Panmure will pray for us all to-night—openly—before the servants.

STULKELEY.

[*Dictating.*] "The raw material pays a penny per pound——"

WOODHOUSE.

[*Leaning back in his chair and holding his head.*] Oh, my dear Reggie, how *can* you!

STULKELEY.

How can I——?

WOODHOUSE.

Hammer away at this tosh! You're forgetting that we may be mixed up—*are* mixed up—in a disgraceful mess.

STULKELEY.

On the contrary, I am fully alive to it.

WOODHOUSE.

Well, but — but — but — what do you intend to do?

STULKELEY.

[*With a statesmanlike air.*] In my judgment, there is only one thing to be done.

WOODHOUSE.

What's that?

STULKELEY.

To Wait and see.

WOODHOUSE.

Wait and see!

STULKELEY.

Wait and see what happens. [*Dictating.*] “The raw material pays a penny per pound.”

WOODHOUSE.

Ugh! [*As he writes.*] Gross impertinence—to suspect *me*—of such an offence!

STULKELEY.

To suspect *us*!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Writing.*] “—a penny per pound.”

STULKELEY.

[*Dictating.*] “The manufactured article pays two-pence per pound.”

WOODHOUSE.

[*Jumping up and going to STULKELEY.*] Blow the manufactured article! Who the devil is the cad, Reggie?

STULKELEY.

I gravely distrust Hebblethwaite. These florid, plethoric men——!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Resentfully.*] And we've given him pig-iron!

STULKELEY.

It must be he or Miss Dulcie's *fiancé*.

WOODHOUSE.

Or Panmure.

STULKELEY.

No, no—didn't you hear?—she has absolved Panmure.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Pulling at a tiny moustache.*] She's tremendously eager to save somebody.

STULKELEY.

[*Pointing to the writing-table.*] Shall we——?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Returning to the writing-table thoughtfully.*] What puzzles me is, why should she go out of her way to whitewash one person——?

STULKELEY.

[*Dictating.*] “The manufactured article pays two-pence per pound.”

WOODHOUSE.

[*Halting at the chair by the writing-table.*] Hark!

STULKELEY.

Eh?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Listening.*] Raining.

STULKELEY.

[*Listening.*] Heavily.

WOODHOUSE.

She said it had begun to drizzle. [*Again going to the curtains and peering through them.*] Pish! Blinding.

STULKELEY.

[*To himself.*] The raw material pays a penny per pound, manufactured it pays double.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Uttering a cry.*] Ah!

[*He dashes through the curtains.*

STULKELEY.

What—! [*He is making for the window when WOODHOUSE reappears with a look of horror.*] Talbot!

WOODHOUSE.

She's there!

STULKELEY.

No !

WOODHOUSE.

She's there, I tell you !

STULKELEY.

Oh ! [*He disappears through the curtains.* WOODHOUSE *paces the room agitatedly until STULKELEY returns.*] There is—a figure—moving about.

WOODHOUSE.

A figure ! It's she ! It's that exquisite little creature !

STULKELEY.

Merciful powers !

WOODHOUSE.

[*Coming to STULKELEY.*] Oh, my dear Reggie !

STULKELEY.

A cruel situation to be placed in !

WOODHOUSE.

Oughtn't we to send a message—!

STULKELEY.

To whom ?

WOODHOUSE.

To the Panmures.

STULKELEY.

[*Crossing to the right.*] My dear Talbot, that would involve us still further. [*Pacing the room.*] What would these good people think ?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Turning up his trousers.*] We can't have her death at our door. [*Turning up his coat-collar.*] We must get her in.

STULKELEY.

She'll accept that as a tacit consent to her preposterous proposal.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Turning down his coat-collar.*] Damn it, I wish she'd never been born !

STULKELEY.

And I, fervently.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Peering through the curtains again.*] An impetuous, blundering little minx !

STULKELEY.

Close the curtains. She sees you peeping.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Yearningly.*] Her *pretty* neck—— !

STULKELEY.

She'll soon tire of her martyrdom, if we ignore her. Close the curtains.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Leaving the window.*] I hate her !

STULKELEY.

[*At the fireplace.*] Anyhow, *we* must protect our-

selves. [*Pointing to the writing-table imperatively.*]
Where were we?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Weakly.*] Oh, my dear old chap——!

STULKELEY.

For heaven's sake, Talbot, pull yourself together!
[*Firmly.*] Cocoa.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Dropping into the chair at the writing-table and feeling for his pen.*] I hate her! [*Reading his notes confusedly.*] “Th’ rawmateria’payspennyperpoun’.”

STULKELEY.

[*Dictating, his fists tightly clenched.*] “Manufactured—manufactured it pays double.”

WOODHOUSE.

[*Listening.*] Wha’s that?

STULKELEY.

[*Listening.*] Hail.

WOODHOUSE.

Hail! [*Leaning his head upon his hands.*] Oh! Oh, her pretty skin!

STULKELEY.

[*Unsteadily.*] “Manufactured—it pays—double.”

WOODHOUSE.

[*Writing.*] “Manu—factured——”

STULKELEY.

[*Suddenly, turning up his trousers.*] Talbot——!

WOODHOUSE.

Eh?

STULKELEY.

I can't bear it! [*Turning up his coat-collar.*] More wood on the fire! [*Hurrying to the window.*] Make the room warmer!

[*He bolts through the curtains. With an exclamation, WOODHOUSE leaps to his feet and proceeds to throw log after log into the grate.*

WOODHOUSE.

Oh! [*Throwing a log.*] Oh! [*Another log.*] The little pet. [*A log.*] Oh, the little flower! [*A log.*] Dainty little rosebud! [*Beating the logs with the poker.*] Little garden of roses! Oh! Oh! [*The curtains are parted and JOSEPHA is almost hurled into the room. Her dress is heavy with wet, tails of hair hang over her eyes, and altogether she is in a deplorable condition.*] My dear little lady! [*STULKELEY appears, blown.*

STULKELEY.

[*To JOSEPHA, wiping his face with his handkerchief.*] I—I beg your pardon.

JOSEPHA.

[*Sullenly, rubbing her arms and panting.*] I'm not accustomed to such rough usage.

STULKELEY.

[*Turning down his coat-collar and trousers.*] There was no time for formalities.

JOSEPHA.

This house is a nest of savages !

WOODHOUSE.

Don't say that !

JOSEPHA.

[*Beginning to cry.*] Oh, what a fool I have made of myself !

STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE.

[*Soothingly.*] No, no !

JOSEPHA.

I have ; but I was so d-d-d-disappointed.

STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE.

Yes, yes.

JOSEPHA.

I was m-m-m-mad. [*Sobbing.*] I repented almost as soon as I'd left you. [*Surveying herself helplessly.*] Oh, what shall I do ! [*Examining her dress.*] Eleven-and-a-half-guineas !

STULKELEY.

[*Pointing to the fire.*] Dry yourself here.

JOSEPHA.

Dry myself ! I'm soaked through to my—I'm wet through.

STULKELEY.

Of course ! How stupid I am ! You must get back to your room.

JOSEPHA.

[*Her teeth chattering.*] I-I-I'm shut out. I-I-I heard the servants locking up.

WOODHOUSE.

She can stay here till we're all at prayers. That's her chance of sneaking upstairs.

JOSEPHA.

Ah, yes; I *have* excused myself from prayers.

STULKELEY.

[*Looking at his watch.*] Every minute is a nail in her coffin.

JOSEPHA.

[*Kicking off her shoes.*] If I keep on the move—
[WOODHOUSE *picks up her shoes and carries them to the fire.*] Oh, thank you awfully. [*To both.*] You are good to me; and after my outrageous conduct!

[*She walks about the room, holding her arms away from her sides.*

STULKELEY.

[*Seized with an idea.*] Ah——!

[*He goes to the washing-cabinet, opens the door, and switches on the light.*

JOSEPHA.

[*On the left, shivering.*] Oh-h-h-h! Oh-h-h-h!

STULKELEY.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] Miss Quarendon——!

JOSEPHA.

Y-y-y-yes?

STULKELEY.

There's a smoking-jacket in here and a pair of slippers.

JOSEPHA.

S-mo-mo-moking-jacket——?

STULKELEY.

I entreat you—I entreat you to guard against catching a chill.

JOSEPHA.

Oh, I cou-ou-ouldn't!

STULKELEY.

Apart from the risk you are running, you must be so horribly uncomfortable!

JOSEPHA.

Uncomfortable—! Oh——!

[She wavers, rushes to the washing-cabinet, enters it, and STULKELEY closes the door.]

STULKELEY.

[After a brief pause.] Ha! *[To WOODHOUSE.]* A happy thought, I flatter myself!

WOODHOUSE.

[Enviously.] Stupendous! I congratulate you on your amazing resource.

STULKELEY.

[*Stiffly.*] It may be the means at least of averting a serious illness.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Sneering.*] Oh, at least.

STULKELEY.

[*Walking about.*] Dear me, dear me, what an injustice I did her!

WOODHOUSE.

Yes, you didn't hesitate to insinuate——

STULKELEY.

I admit—I candidly admit—her threat of self-destruction appeared to me to lack ingenuousness. I owe her a most abject apology. I—I—I grovel at her feet. Anybody more entirely without guile I've never met. [*Halting and regarding WOODHOUSE significantly.*] I cannot understand your decided antipathy to her, my dear Talbot.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Choking.*] Antipathy!

STULKELEY.

Hating her, as you say you do. [*In a transport.*] Her nature, unless I am egregiously mistaken—her nature is like crystal. [*With a change of tone, glancing at the door of the cabinet.*] It will be delicate of us to show Miss Quarendon that we are engrossed in work. [*Pointing to the writing-table.*] Let us——

WOODHOUSE.

[*Grinding his teeth.*] Cocoa ?

STULKELEY.

Cocoa. [WOODHOUSE *takes his seat at the writing-table again, first kicking the chair viciously.*] Where——?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Referring to his notes.*] Oh, the blessed old raw material is still paying a penny a pound.

STULKELEY.

[*Leaning against the chair on the right of the fireplace, dictating absently.*] “The—ah—h’m—the manufactured article——” [*Humming*] h’m, h’m, h’m——! “—the—h’m—the manufactured article pays two-pence per pound.” [*Humming.*] Tra, la, la, la——!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Turning to STULKELEY.*] My dear chap, forgive me for directing your attention to such a paltry detail, but we are not setting this to music, you know.

[*A whistle is heard, proceeding from the cabinet. The men look at each other inquiringly. The whistle is repeated.*]

STULKELEY.

[*Hastening to the door of the cabinet.*] Yes?

JOSEPHA.

[*From within.*] Mr. Stulkeley——

STULKELEY.

I am here.

JOSEPHA.

[*Opening the door a few inches and handing out her dress.*] Please hang my frock on the fender. [*He takes the dress from her.*] Oh, thank you.

[*She closes the door and STULKELEY goes to the fireplace and arranges the dress tenderly but clumsily upon the fender-stool.*

STULKELEY.

Poor girl! P-o-o-r girl! Saturated!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Writhing with jealousy.*] You are bungling that fearfully, my dear Reggie.

STULKELEY.

It will persist in falling into the hearth.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Jumping up.*] Spread it out, man. [*Grabbing at the dress.*] Can't you spread it out!

STULKELEY.

[*Resigning the dress to WOODHOUSE, mildly.*] My dear Talbot——!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Rearranging the dress.*] If I couldn't maid a lady better than you're doing it, I'd poison myself.

STULKELEY.

[*Thinking.*] Talbot——

WOODHOUSE.

It's steaming! It's steaming beautifully!

STULKELEY.

[*Moving to the left.*] Talbot, I'll send a telegram in the morning to my sister.

WOODHOUSE.

What about?

STULKELEY.

About Miss Quarendon. A long and explicit telegram!

WOODHOUSE.

Yes, *she* might find Miss Quarendon another billet.

STULKELEY.

Another billet? Oh, there's no hurry for *that*.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Turning to STULKELEY, suspiciously.*] No hurry?

STULKELEY.

[*Walking up and down.*] A gently-nurtured girl in a position little higher than a menial's! Terrible! Too terrible!

WOODHOUSE.

Then what——?

STULKELEY.

I'll ask Joan to invite her to Eaton Square for a month or two.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Between his teeth.*] To your house !

STULKELEY.

[*Testily.*] My dear fellow, to whose house, if not mine, *could* my sister invite her ?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Under 'his breath, glaring at STULKELEY fiercely.*] Oho-o-o !

STULKELEY.

Perhaps Miss Quarendon can delay her departure to-morrow till it's fixed up.

[*There is a cry from JOSEPHA. The men look at each other in alarm.*

WOODHOUSE *and* STULKELEY.

Eh ?

JOSEPHA'S VOICE.

Mr. Stulkeley !

STULKELEY.

[*Bounding to the door of the cabinet.*] What's the matter ?

JOSEPHA.

[*From within.*] The matter ! I've heard nearly every word you've been saying !

STULKELEY.

Indeed !

JOSEPHA.

Your sister ! Eaton Square ! You're not serious !

Do you really think she'll have me! Oh, you're the kindest man on earth!

STULKELEY.

[*Rather uneasily.*] Er—not at all.

JOSEPHA.

Mr. Stulkeley!

STULKELEY.

Yes?

JOSEPHA.

Bar politeness, you and Mr. Woodhouse *are* very busy, aren't you?

STULKELEY.

V-very.

JOSEPHA.

Because, if you wouldn't take any notice of me, I could dry my hair by the fire.

STULKELEY.

I assure you——

JOSEPHA.

Oh, *thank* you. [*Joyously.*] Ha, ha, ha! Go away; I shall be ready to come out directly.

[STULKELEY *leaves the door and encounters*
WOODHOUSE. *They whisper.*

WOODHOUSE.

[*Hoarsely.*] Reggie——

STULKELEY.

Eh?

WOODHOUSE.

Heard every word!

STULKELEY.

Phew! Luckily I said nothing but what's pleasant

WOODHOUSE.

Pleasant! [*Extending his arms.*] I've an antipathy to her! I hate her!

STULKELEY.

My dear Talbot, let this be a lesson to *you*.

WOODHOUSE.

Lesson!

STULKELEY.

Learn to control your tongue—always your worst enemy!

WOODHOUSE.

I was agitated—excited——!

[*JOSEPHA breaks into song. The men listen for a while, insensibly swaying to the melody; then STULKELEY points to the writing-table.*

STULKELEY.

We must——

WOODHOUSE.

[*Furiously.*] Ha! Cocoa!

JOSEPHA'S VOICE.

I'm coming out!

[*The men sit hurriedly, WOODHOUSE at the writing-table, STULKELEY — having first turned the chair in a direction opposite to that of the door of the cabinet—in the arm-chair by the oblong table.*

STULKELEY.

[To WOODHOUSE.] Where——?

WOODHOUSE.

[*With biting distinctness.*] “The raw material pays a penny per pound.”

[JOSEPHIA appears, carrying a towel. She is wearing the smoking-jacket and a silk petticoat of many flounces and, on her bare feet, the wool-work slippers. She closes the door of the cabinet and goes quietly to the fireplace.]

STULKELEY.

[*Dictating.*] “The manufactured article pays two-pence per pound.” [*Gently, as WOODHOUSE writes.*] Is that you, Miss Quarendon?

JOSEPHIA.

[*Sitting upon the fender-stool and removing her combs—in a whisper.*] Yes.

STULKELEY.

I had no idea that that door is so thin.

JOSEPHIA.

I wouldn't have it the sixtieth part of an inch thicker while I can hear such good news through it. [*Gratefully.*] My dear, dear friend!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Wriggling.*] “—two-pence per pound.”

JOSEPHA.

To think that ten minutes ago I was weary of life !
[*Laughing gaily as she shakes her hair down.*] Life !
Ha, ha !

WOODHOUSE.

[*Gnawing his pen.*] “The manufactured article——” !

JOSEPHA.

[*Who, with STULKELEY, has become unconscious of WOODHOUSE'S presence.*] Mr. Stulkeley——

STULKELEY.

Eh ?

WOODHOUSE.

My dear Reggie—— !

JOSEPHA.

[*To STULKELEY.*] Ah, I'm hindering you !

STULKELEY.

Not a bit. [*To WOODHOUSE.*] One moment, Talbot.

JOSEPHA.

[*To STULKELEY, wistfully.*] Mr. Stulkeley, I hope I shan't reward you by bringing trouble upon *your* abode as I've brought it upon *this*.

STULKELEY.

I'm content to make the experiment.

JOSEPHA.

[*Beating her hands together in ecstasy.*] Oh ! Oh !

[WOODHOUSE *flings his pen at the inkstand violently.*]
I beg your pardon. [*Putting her finger to her lips.*]
H'm!

STULKELEY.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] Er—where are we, my dear Talbot?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Emphatically.*] “The manufactured article——”

STULKELEY.

Yes, yes. [*His hand to his brow, trying to collect his thoughts.*] “The—ah—the manufactured article——”?
It pays two-pence a pound, doesn't it?

JOSEPHA.

[*Whistling to STULKELEY, softly.*] Whissst!

STULKELEY.

[*Half-turning to her.*] Eh?

JOSEPHA.

[*Slipping her combs into a pocket of the smoking-jacket—roguishly.*] Don't be wild if you find the pockets of your jacket full of combs when you next wear it.

STULKELEY.

My jacket? That isn't my jacket.

JOSEPHA.

Not? W-w-whose——?

STULKELEY.

I presume it's Mr. Panmure's.

JOSEPHA.

[*Starting up with a cry of horror.*] Oh!

STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE.

[*Turning to her.*] What——?

JOSEPHA.

Of course it is! I've seen the wretch in it! Oh, let me take it off! [*The men rise and go to her.*] Lend me a coat, one of you! Give me my shoes! [*Frantically.*] Oh-h-h-h! [*To STULKELEY.*] Lend me your coat!

STULKELEY.

Miss Quarendon——!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Looking at STULKELEY.*] Reggie—PANMURE!

STULKELEY.

[*Looking at WOODHOUSE.*] Panmure! [*There is a pause and then a knock at the door on the right.*] Sssh! [*The handle of the door is turned. STULKELEY raises his voice.*] Who is it?

PANMURE.

[*Without.*] Panmure. [*Silently and swiftly they bundle JOSEPHA into the cabinet with her belongings and close the door upon her. Then WOODHOUSE seats himself at the writing-table as STULKELEY unlocks the*

door on the right and admits PANMURE.] Sorry if I incommode you, gentlemen.

STULKELEY.

[With elaborate courtesy.] Come in. Mr. Woodhouse and I have just finished. Glad to see you.

WOODHOUSE.

[Gathering up his papers and switching off the light of the lamp on the writing-table.] Extremely glad, my dear Mr. Panmure.

PANMURE.

[Moving to the middle of the room, austere but with a shifting eye.] I—er—ahem!—I've put it off as long as I could.

STULKELEY.

[Shutting the door and advancing.] Put it off?

PANMURE.

A most disagreeable duty, b'George!

STULKELEY.

[Suavely.] Bless me!

PANMURE.

[At the fireplace.] In fact, I can't recollect when I've had a *more* disagreeable duty to discharge, gentlemen.

WOODHOUSE.

[Turning in his chair so that he faces PANMURE.]
Good gracious!

PANMURE.

And that's saying something, sitting as I do on the bench at Polehampton—a J.P., b'George!—and dealing with distressing cases—harrowing cases—as I frequently have to.

STULKELEY.

But what——?

WOODHOUSE.

[*To STULKELEY.*] My dear Reggie!

PANMURE.

Mr. Stulkeley—Mr. Woodhouse—a young lady staying under my roof has been insulted.

STULKELEY.

Insulted?

PANMURE.

Insulted, sir—kissed—slobbered over; and by a man who's also staying under my roof.

STULKELEY.

When——?

PANMURE.

This afternoon, after tea. We've found it out by chance; she refuses to give him away.

WOODHOUSE.

A young lady?

PANMURE.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] Yes, sir, and none the less a lady, and deserving of proper respect, because she has

the misfortune to be employed by me as a governess—er—because she has the misfortune to be obliged——

STULKELEY.

Miss Quarendon ?

WOODHOUSE.

Miss Josey !

PANMURE.

[*To* WOODHOUSE, *severely*.] “Josey” to those who have the right to call her by her kennel-name, Mr. Woodhouse—er—by her pet-name.

STULKELEY.

[*Reprovingly*.] Talbot !

PANMURE.

Now, gentlemen, we don't kiss girls in my house without being perfectly sure beforehand——[*with a wave of the hand*] er—ah—what I mean is, this sort o' caper won't do at The Clewers, I can tell you. [*Puffing himself out*.] No, no ; this won't do for *me*, gentlemen.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Rising*.] My dear friend, have you any notion—— ?

STULKELEY.

As to who the offender is.

PANMURE.

He must be one of a quartette ; we haven't got beyond *that*, at present.

STULKELEY.

The four being—— ?

PANMURE.

[*To STULKELEY.*] Hebblethwaite, Hughie Loring, Mr. Woodhouse and yourself. [*STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE turn away without speaking.*] Hebblethwaite and Hughie have been charged with it; I've charged 'em with it.

STULKELEY.

[*Drawing his breath in forcibly through his nostrils.*] Well?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Crooking his fingers.*] Well?

PANMURE.

[*Becoming unhinged under the strain.*] They—they won't admit it. [*Quirering.*] Obstinate brutes! Neither of 'em'll admit it. [*Wiping the perspiration from his brow and throat.*] Boys—[*coming forward*] boys—confess! [*A pause.*] Look me in the face, boys, if you can. Oh, I'm a man o' the world, and if this hadn't occurred in my own house—under my roof—a gentleman's roof, b'George!—I say, if this hadn't happened under my own roof, I might have taken a more lenient view of it. But you—my guests, you know—receiving my hospitality—oh, I don't want to be hard, boys, but—which of you's done it?

[*There is another pause, and then WOODHOUSE and STULKELEY, as if by mutual agreement, turn and approach PANMURE closely.*]

STULKELEY.

Mr. Panmure——

WOODHOUSE.

Panmure——

PANMURE.

H-hey?

STULKELEY.

[*Tapping PANMURE's shoulder*] *You are the man.*

PANMURE.

[*Attempting to bluster.*] Wh-a-a-t!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Laying a finger on PANMURE's waistcoat.*] *You have done it, Panmure.*

PANMURE.

Ho, I'm the man, am I! I—I've done it, hey!
[*Breaking away from them.*] Here! We'll see about this! Late as it is, you shall be driven to the Crown at Polehampton to-night, bag and baggage! [*He is making for the door on the right when the door of the cabinet opens and JOSEPHIA appears. He recoils and, with a moan, falls into the chair by the oblong table.*] Oh-h-h!

JOSEPHIA.

[*Closing the door of the cabinet and coming to STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE, appealingly.*] Mr. Stulkeley—Mr. Woodhouse——

PANMURE.

Oh! Oh, don't listen to her, boys! She's been concocting some story or other. We picked her out

of the gutter, my missus and I. Untrustworthy little drab!

STULKELEY.

[*Coming to* PANMURE.] Mr. Panmure——

PANMURE.

[*Sitting upright.*] What's she doing in my library, dressed like that—in my jacket—and my slippers! Disgraceful! In a gentleman's house! Disgraceful!

[*He is struggling to his feet when* STULKELEY *pushes him back with a light touch.*

STULKELEY.

[*To* PANMURE.] Miss Quarendon was so imprudent as to venture out in the rain——

PANMURE.

She's a liar. And you're abetting her. You're all liars.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Joining* STULKELEY.] You moderate your tone, Panmure.

JOSEPHA.

[*To* STULKELEY *and* WOODHOUSE.] Mr. Stulkeley—Mr. Woodhouse—everything that's taken place here to-night is in confidence, remember!

PANMURE.

[*Discerning a ray of hope.*] Yes, in confidence—in confidence!

JOSEPHA.

[*To* STULKELEY *and* WOODHOUSE.] You're on your

honour ! Oh, for Lottie's sake—for Mrs. Panmure's sake—you won't betray him, will you ?

PANMURE.

No, for my wife's sake, boys, let me off ! It's my first offence since Lottie married me ; I swear it's my first offence. I'm always merciful, myself, to a first offence, when I'm on the bench.

JOSEPHA.

[*To STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE.*] Ah, tell him he's safe ! Stop him making such a sickening exhibition of himself !

PANMURE.

[*Piteously.*] I'm your host, boys—I've done you well——

JOSEPHA.

[*Her hands to her ears.*] Stop him !

PANMURE.

[*To STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE.*] You're not struck dumb, are yer ? You're unnerving me ! Don't unnerve me, boys. I've got to preach a sermon to you in a minute or two——

JOSEPHA.

[*Hysterically.*] Ha, ha, ha !

PANMURE.

I have ; I've got to read you a discourse. [*Dragging his manuscript from his pocket.*] I sha'n't be able to see a word of it, if you unnerve me. [*Staring at the*

paper.] I—I *can't* see a word of it! Oh, do ease my mind, boys! Ease my mind; there's good boys!

JOSEPHA.

[*Stamping her foot.*] Stop him!

STULKELEY.

[*Sternly.*] Mr. Panmure——

PANMURE.

Hey?

STULKELEY.

There is no need for Miss Quarendon to remind us——

WOODHOUSE.

None whatever.

PANMURE.

In confidence!

STULKELEY.

[*After a glance at JOSEPHA.*] I speak for Mr. Woodhouse and myself—complete, inviolable confidence.

PANMURE.

Oh——! [*Pocketing his sermon and jumping up.*] Oh, boys! [*Offering his hand to STULKELEY.*] Stulkeley, I—I humbly apologise. [*STULKELEY turns on his heel and moves away to the right. PANMURE offers his hand to WOODHOUSE.*] Woodhouse, a gentleman can't do more—— [*WOODHOUSE stalks disdainfully to the fireplace. PANMURE goes to JOSEPHA.*] Josey—Josey, you're a duchess.

JOSEPHA

[*Shrinking from him.*] Ah-h-h—— !

STULKELEY.

[*Suddenly.*] Sssh ! Silence ![*Everybody stands quite still, listening to sounds in the passage.*]

PANMURE.

[*His eyes bolting.*] Great Scot !

STULKELEY.

[*Opening the door of the cabinet.*] Miss Quarendon—— ! [JOSEPHA makes a dash for the cabinet and enters it. STULKELEY closes the door and comes to PANMURE.] Hebblethwaite !

PANMURE.

And Hughie ! [In a whisper, as they all watch the door on the right.] They've lost their heads.

WOODHOUSE.

[In a whisper, joining STULKELEY.] Lost their heads ?

PANMURE.

Oh, there's been a terrific scene.

STULKELEY.

Scene ?

PANMURE.

[*With a queer look.*] Yes ; their women won't believe 'em.

[*The door on the right is thrown open and* HEBBLETHWAITE *enters, followed by* LORING. HEBBLETHWAITE *is in a state of excitement bordering on apoplexy; LORING is like a man walking in a troubled sleep.*

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To* PANMURE, *hoarsely.*] Well! [*PANMURE goes to him.*] St. John——?

PANMURE.

Alfred——

HEBBLETHWAITE

Yes—yes—yes?

PANMURE.

[*To* LORING, *who has partly shut the door and joined* HEBBLETHWAITE.] Hughie—[*to both*] boys, you must prepare yourselves.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Prepare ourselves!

LORING.

[*In a hollow voice.*] Prepare——?

PANMURE.

I—I can't do anything with 'em.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Can't do anything——

LORING.

Can't——!

PANMURE.

They deny it, both of 'em. [*To STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE.*] Don't you, boys?

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Loosening his collar.*] Deny it!

LORING.

Oh-h-h-h!

PANMURE.

[*Buttonholing* HEBBLETHWAITE.] Alfred, try to exercise more self-control, ol'man.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Try to——!

LORING.

[*Laughing idiotically.*] He, he, he, he!

PANMURE.

[*To* HEBBLETHWAITE.] You'll live it down, ol'man; you're young enough yet to live it down. [*Urgently.*] Alf!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Elbowing* PANMURE *aside and confronting* WOODHOUSE *and* STULKELEY.] Stulkeley—Woodhouse——

STULKELEY.

[*Advancing to* HEBBLETHWAITE, *sympathetically.*] My dear Hebblethwaite——

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Breathing heavily.*] Stulkeley—my old lady and I

—all these years—she's been jealous before - never like this—thought it had died out—it's blazed up again—awful—help me—the truth—you or Woodhouse—rather it were Woodhouse—always had an esteem for you—Stulkeley——!

STULKELEY.

[*Unhappily.*] My dear Hebblethwaite——

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Yes—yes?

STULKELEY.

I grieve—I grieve at not being able to aid you in your sad predicament.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Dully.*] Not—able——?

STULKELEY.

[*With emotion.*] My dear fellow——!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Woodhouse, then! Woodhouse! [STULKELEY *steps back to allow WOODHOUSE to reply for himself.*] Woodhouse——?

[WOODHOUSE *shrugs his shoulders commiseratively and shakes his head.* HEBBLETHWAITE *groans.*

LORING.

[*Flapping his arms despairingly.*] He, he, he, he!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Slowing, turning to LORING.*] Yes, you—you

villain ! [*Furiously.*] You base, unfeeling villain !
[*Making for him.*] It is you !

STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE.

[*Seizing* HEBBLETHWAITE.] Hebblethwaite ! Hebblethwaite !

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Villain !

PANMURE.

[*Putting himself before* LORING.] Hi ! I can't have a scrap here ! Hi !

STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE.

Hebblethwaite—— !

[*From a distance comes the prolonged clang of a gong. A hush falls upon them all. STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE lead HEBBLETHWAITE, now unresisting, to the chair by the writing-table and seat him there, while LORING drops into the chair by the oblong table. As the sound of the gong ceases, PANMURE mops his brow again, pulls down his waistcoat, and adjusts his neck-tie.*

PANMURE.

[*Solemnly.*] Call it a draw, boys. Collect yourselves. [*Smoothing his hair.*] Put your hair straight. [HEBBLETHWAITE meekly suffers STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE to put him in order. LORING experiences some difficulty in finding his head.] Good boys ; good boys. [*Giving a twist to his moustache.*] Bind yourselves over to keep the peace, or—[*taking a peep at the*

manuscript in his breast-pocket] or you'll unnerve me.
Now then! Y're ready?

[STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE lift HEBBLETHWAITE out of his chair. PANMURE is performing the same office for LORING when LORING shakes him off and advances to HEBBLETHWAITE threateningly.

LORING.

How dare you! How dare you! How dare you!

[*The hubbub is renewed and again it is necessary to separate HEBBLETHWAITE and LORING.*

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To LORING.*] You villain! You heartless villain!

STULKELEY.

Hebblethwaite!

WOODHOUSE.

Loring!

PANMURE.

No scrap here! Hi!

LORING.

If he wasn't an elderly man——!

STULKELEY.

[*To HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Come with me, Hebblethwaite.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Heartless villain!

PANMURE.

Hi!

LORING.

How dare he!

WOODHOUSE.

Panmure, catch hold of Loring.

[*Ultimately a procession is formed. STULKELEY prepares to escort HEBBLETHWAITE, WOODHOUSE protecting their rear. PANMURE guards LORING.*]

PANMURE.

Now, then, boys, once again! I say, Stulkeley, *can't* you tidy your man's head? Simple thing, I should ha' thought. Lord, look at Hughie's collar! Y're ready? I'll switch the lights off. One—two—three! Go!

[*They are moving to the door on the right when the door is pushed open and MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE appears. Her face is blotchy from weeping and her hair is disarranged. She leans against the door, exhausted. DULCIE is behind her, white and with a set mouth and flaming eyes.*]

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*After a pause, convulsively.*] Tell me! This suspense is killing me.

DULCIE.

Get along, aunt. Don't stick in the doorway.

[*As MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE advances, PANMURE retreats to the fireplace and STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE withdraw to the left.*]

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Alfred Hebblethwaite !

DULCIE.

[*Crossing swiftly to LORING, leaping over the train of MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE'S dress on her way.*] Mr. Loring !

PANMURE.

[*Raising his hands.*] Girls ! Girls !

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Quick !

DULCIE.

[*To LORING.*] Open your mouth—[*observing that it is already wide open*] or shut it. Speak !

PANMURE.

Don't, girls, don't ; there's good girls ! [Mrs. PANMURE *has entered hurriedly.*] Here's Lottums. [PANMURE *goes to her.*] What d'ye think, Lottums ! Stulkeley and Woodhouse deny it.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Faintly.*] D-d-deny it ?

DULCIE.

Deny it !

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Piously.*] Dulcie—aunt Corisande—the gong has sounded. Let there be a truce.

PANMURE.

[*At the door on the right.*] Yes, yes; a truce. A truce, b'George!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *and* DULCIE.

[*To* STULKELEY, *who comes forward.*] Mr. Stulkeley——?

STULKELEY.

[*Standing between* DULCIE *and* HEBBLETHWAITE.] My dear Mrs. Hebblethwaite — my dear Miss Anstice——

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To* STULKELEY.] Is it so?

DULCIE.

[*To* STULKELEY.] You deny it?

STULKELEY.

[*Drawing himself up.*] Oh, certainly. [*With a stately bow.*] We deny it.

[MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *sinks into the chair by the oblong table as* MRS. PANMURE *goes to* STULKELEY *penitently.*

MRS. PANMURE.

My dear Mr. Stulkeley——!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Bending over* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE, *thickly.*] Corry—Corry——

MRS. PANMURE.

Hush, uncle!

DULCIE.

[*Laughing harshly.*] Ha, ha, ha!

MRS. PANMURE.

Hush, Dulcie! We will resume this by-and-by.

LORING.

[*Who has dropped into the chair by the writing-table—to DULCIE.*] Ask my mother what sort o' life I've always led. Ask her!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Corry—Corry, old lady——

LORING.

[*To DULCIE.*] Ask my sister Edith——

MRS. PANMURE.

Hush! Oh, hush!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Corry, it *must* be that young man Loring; it *must* be he.

LORING.

[*Leaping to his feet.*] Ah!

HEBBLETHWAITE

There's no one else——

LORING.

How dare you!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*In distress.*] Oh! Oh! Oh!

LORING.

[*Trying to get at HEBBLETHWAITE.*] How dare you!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Shaking his fist at LORING.*] You selfish, cold-blooded villain!

PANMURE.

Hi! No scrap in the presence of ladies!

STULKELEY.

[*To HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Be quiet, Hebblethwaite!

MRS. PANMURE.

Uncle Alfred!

LORING.

[*In the grip of DULCIE.*] How dare he!

STULKELEY.

[*To LORING.*] Mr. Loring!

DULCIE.

[*To LORING.*] Heel up!

PANMURE.

This won't do for me! Hi!

LORING.

[*Shouting.*] Ask my mother — ask my sister Edie——!

DULCIE.

[*Thrusting LORING back into his chair.*] Heel, I say !
[*Again the clang of the gong is heard and again
silence falls upon the assembly.*]

MRS. PANMURE.

[*As the sound dies out.*] The servants are waiting.
[*Wringing her hands.*] Oh, dear ; oh, dear ! [Looking
round beseechingly.] Come, everybody.

PANMURE.

[*Opening the door on the right, softly.*] Tidy your
heads, boys.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To STULKELEY.*] Shall we lead the way ?
[*MRS. PANMURE and STULKELEY are moving
towards the door when MRS. HEBBLE-
THWAITE rises.*]

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To MRS. PANMURE.*] No, Lottie !

MRS. PANMURE.

Auntie—— !

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

The servants can wait ; it won't hurt them. I
insist—I insist upon Miss Quarendon being brought
down from her room and being made to confront my
husband and these gentlemen.

MRS. PANMURE.

No, no ; not now.

STULKELEY.

[*Anxiously.*] Not now ; not now.

PANMURE.

Not now !

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Resolutely.*] Now ; before we go into prayers.

DULCIE.

I agree. Quite right, aunt !

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

I'll fetch her myself. [*Going to the door.*] If I have to use main force——

DULCIE.

[*Running to* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.] I'll help you.

PANMURE.

[*In the doorway.*] Here ! Who's master in this house !

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Move away, St. John.

DULCIE.

Don't be a fool, St. John.

PANMURE.

Lottie !

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Going to* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *and* DULCIE.]
Dulcie—aunt Corisande——

PANMURE.

[*To STULKELEY, who is engaged in parting LORING and HEBBLETHWAITE, between whom a violent altercation has again broken out.*] Stulkeley!

[WOODHOUSE has been standing by the settee, following events with varying sensations. At this juncture, with a wild look but with an air of determination, he pushes HEBBLETHWAITE aside, and, coming between him and STULKELEY, advances to the middle of the room.]

WOODHOUSE.

[*In a strange voice.*] Excuse me. [*Louder.*] Mrs. Panmure! [*Everybody turns to him, surprised.*] The—ah—the time has arrived perhaps when—ah—when it is due to all parties that—ah—that this mystery should be cleared up.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE and DULCIE.

Perhaps!

MRS. PANMURE.

Mr. Woodhouse?

STULKELEY.

My dear Talbot——!

HEBBLETHWAITE and LORING.

What——?

PANMURE.

[*Startled.*] Hey?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Digging his nails into his palms.*] I—ah—have an

announcement—ah—an interesting announcement to make to you.

[*There is a low murmur of inquiry as PANMURE, his eyes starting from his head, comes through the group of women.*

PANMURE.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] What'r yer talking about!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Restraining him.*] St. John dear!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Advancing to the further side of the oblong table.*] Hold your tongue, St. John.

DULCIE.

[*To PANMURE.*] Shut up!

PANMURE.

[*In agony.*] What's he talking about! The gong's gone twice! I won't have the rules of my house broken. [DULCIE holds him by his coat.] Stulkeley!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Breathing irregularly.*] My dear Mr. and Mrs. Panmure—oh, my dear friends—I—I deplore—I deplore exceedingly the confusion and derangement I have brought upon this establishment by my misbehaviour towards a most admirable and circumspect young lady.

MR. and MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE and LORING.
Oh-h-h-h!

DULCIE.

He!

MRS. PANMURE.

Mr. Woodhouse !

WOODHOUSE.

[*Steeling himself for a final effort and speaking in high, clear tones.*] I—I am the man.

[*There is a general, half-suppressed exclamation.*

PANMURE is thunderstruck.

STULKELEY.

[*Close to WOODHOUSE.*] You !

WOODHOUSE.

[*Giving STULKELEY a look of mingled cunning and triumph.*] Yes, Reggie, I've deceived you. I did it.

[*STULKELEY returns the look understandingly as*

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE totters across to HEBBLETHWAITE and falls upon his neck.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Bursting into tears.*] Alfred—— !

STULKELEY.

[*To MRS. PANMURE.*] My dear Mrs. Panmure—— !
[*To WOODHOUSE.*] Talbot—— !

WOODHOUSE.

[*At the point of collapse.*] Dear chap ?

STULKELEY.

Please don't address me familiarly. [*Loftily.*] I am disgusted with you—dis-gusted. [*Going to MRS. PANMURE.*] Mrs. Panmure——

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Embracing DULCIE.*] Oh, Dulcie, darling! [*Going to the HEBBLETHWAITES.*] Auntie—uncle Alfred——! [*Shaking hands with LORING.*] Mr. Loring!

PANMURE.

[*Recovering himself and shaking hands warmly with DULCIE.*] Sure all along it wasn't Hughie. [*Finding STULKELEY by his side.*] And what the devil do you mean, sir, by introducing this class o' person into my house—a gentleman's house, b'George! What the——

[*STULKELEY grasps the lapel of PANMURE'S coat wrathfully as DULCIE advances to WOODHOUSE.*

DULCIE.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] You—you vicious, dissolute little creature! [*WOODHOUSE hangs his head.*] You—you deserve to be——[*Becoming conscious that LORING, with outstretched arms, is beaming upon her.*] Well, what's the matter with you?

LORING.

[*Patuously.*] Dulce!

DULCIE.

[*Leaving WOODHOUSE and going to LORING—with deep contempt.*] Yes, I might have known you haven't the pluck to have done it.

LORING.

[*Staggered.*] Dulce!

[*DULCIE sweeps away to the settee, followed by LORING, as MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE, accom-*

panied by HEBBLETHWAITE, bears down upon WOODHOUSE.

PANMURE.

[Expostulating with STULKELEY, under his breath.]
Don't; don't! Can't help myself!

STULKELEY.

[Releasing him and pacing the room on the right.]
Pah!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[To WOODHOUSE.] Mr. Woodhouse——

WOODHOUSE.

[Unsteadily.] Dear lady?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Don't "dear lady" me! Oh, if I were a man and could wield a horse-whip——! *[Going to STULKELEY.]*
I compliment you upon your associates, Mr. Stulkeley!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[Touching WOODHOUSE on the shoulder.] I can wield a horse-whip, Mr. Woodhouse, and I invite you to meet me at the stables to-morrow morning. What hour'll suit you?

WOODHOUSE.

[Feebly.] Any hour mos' convenient——

PANMURE.

[Who has advanced to WOODHOUSE.] No, no, Alfred; leave him to me. *[To WOODHOUSE.]* Hound!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Hound! That's better! Kick him, St. John; you kick him! [*Going to STULKELEY and MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] 'Pon my soul, Stulkeley——!

PANMURE.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] Hound! [*In a whisper.*] Good boy! [*Aloud.*] Hound!

LORING.

[*Advancing to WOODHOUSE, followed by DULCIE.*] No pluck! No pluck, haven't I! [*To WOODHOUSE.*] Woodhouse, my engagement with you in London—music-hall—reg'lar night of it—it's off. D'ye hear? Off!

PANMURE.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] Hound!

LORING.

[*Glancing at DULCIE.*] No pluck! [*Slapping WOODHOUSE on the cheek.*] Heugh! [*Slapping him upon the other cheek.*] Heugh!

DULCIE.

[*Seizing LORING's arm.*] Hughie——!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Coming forward and placing herself between LORING and WOODHOUSE, indignantly.*] Mr. Loring! [*To PANMURE.*] St. John, desist! [*PANMURE retreats to the fireplace.*] Oh, I am ashamed of you all!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Advancing.*] Ashamed !

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Going to her.*] Yes, aunt Corisande, ashamed.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Really——!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Joining* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.] Hoity, toity !

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Pointing to* WOODHOUSE, *who presents a most abject appearance.*] Don't you think he is sufficiently punished without being reviled for his misdeeds—[*to* LORING] and struck ?

LORING.

[*Sulkily.*] No, I don't.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To* MRS. PANMURE.] A thorough change of tune on your part, Lottie !

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Treacherous little coward !

MRS. PANMURE.

Coward ! To abase himself before us voluntarily when he might have escaped detection ! Yes, I *have* changed my tune, auntie, because I ask myself who, after all, has displayed the greater courage—he or

ourselves? [*Gazing at WOODHOUSE with melting eyes.*] Mr. Woodhouse—[*There is a murmur of disapproval, checked by the sound of organ-music in the distance.*] Hus-s-s-sh! [*Listening rapturously.*] Caroline is at the organ. [*To WOODHOUSE.*] Mr. Woodhouse—

WOODHOUSE.

[*Snivelling.*] Y-y-yes?

MRS. PANMURE.

Face me. [*He obeys her.*] You repent?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Nodding.*] I'm.

[*With an expression of beatitude, she unpins the badge at her breast and attaches it to WOODHOUSE'S coat.*]

MRS. PANMURE.

[*As she does so.*] You shall see Mr. Pruyn in the morning. [*He squints down at the badge and his jaw drops. Heaving a sigh of satisfaction, she gives him her arm.*] Come; we will go together.

[*STULKELEY stands at the door as they pass out. He follows, erect, with MR. and MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE; and they are followed by DULCIE and LORING and, last, by PANMURE. When PANMURE reaches the door, he halts and, turning sharply, speeds back to the writing-table. There, unlocking a drawer, he takes out a spirit-flask, puts it to his lips, and drains its contents. While he is thus fortifying himself, JOSEPHA opens the door of the cabinet—where she has switched off the light—and peeps out*]

cautiously. Then she steps into the room, carrying her dress, shoes, and a little white bundle. Closing the door noiselessly, she stands contemplating PANMURE. He replaces the flask, locks the drawer, and, with trembling hands, produces his manuscript ; upon which, uttering a low, gurgling cry, she drops her dress, shoes, and bundle, and, before he is aware of her presence, makes a spring at him and snatches the manuscript from him. He attempts to regain it, but she shoves him away, tears it into strips and throws them on to the fire, Then she points sternly to the door and, with a wail of despair, and holding his head, he totters after the others.

END OF THE THIRD ACT.

THE FOURTH ACT

The scene is a drawing-room, tastefully decorated and furnished. In the wall at the back, on the left, a door opens into the room from a landing, and on the right of this door there are folding doors, closed, suggesting that there is a room beyond. The folding doors are in three leaves and there is a key in the lock of the middle leaf.

The fireplace, where a fire is burning, is in the right-hand wall, and opposite the fire-place, against the left-hand wall, there is a console-table with a lofty mirror above it.

An arm-chair stands on either side of the fireplace ; facing the fireplace there is a settee ; at the back of the settee are a small writing-table and a chair ; and by the side of the writing-table there is a fauteuil-stool.

On the left, standing out in the room, there is another settee. On its right are a table and an arm-chair, on its left two more arm-chairs. A piece of statuary is in the right-hand corner of the room, and other articles of furniture—cabinets, “occasional” chairs, jardinières, etc., etc.—occupy spaces against the walls.

It is daylight.

[MISS STULKELEY, a composed, firm-looking lady of forty-five is seated at the writing-table, sealing an envelope. Presently STULKELEY

PRESERVING MR. PANMURE

enters at the door on the left. He is wearing an orchid in his coat and his general appearance is almost dandified, but he has a troubled air nevertheless.

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Glancing at him over her shoulder.*] Ah!

STULKELEY.

[*Closing the door.*] Good morning, Joan. [*Advancing.*] Busy?

MISS STULKELEY.

Answering a few invitations. [*Collecting her letters.*] I've done.

STULKELEY.

[*Standing at the further side of the writing-table, with a show of indifference.*] Where—where is our little friend this morning?

MISS STULKELEY.

Josepha? She has run round to Sloane Street for me, to my glove-shop.

STULKELEY.

Alone?

MISS STULKELEY.

No.

STULKELEY.

[*Smothering an exclamation.*] D-a-a-a——!

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Raising her eyebrows.*] Reginald!

STULKELEY

[*Controlling himself and speaking with icy calmness.*] You mean, Talbot is with her?

MISS STULKELEY.

I was giving her my instructions when Talbot came into the room and said that, as he had finished with you——

STULKELEY.

[*Incisively.*] He has *not* finished with me. [*Going to the fireplace.*] At any rate, I have not finished with *him*. There is still a considerable amount of work lying on my table downstairs.

MISS STULKELEY.

I am merely telling you what he *said*.

STULKELEY.

[*Poking the fire.*] He has been neglecting his duties shamefully during the past week—ever since that disagreeable incident at the Panmures', in fact.

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Rising, her letters in her hand.*] Indeed?

STULKELEY.

[*Dropping the poker with a clatter and turning to her.*] The proposal that he should escort Miss Quarendon to Sloane Street didn't proceed from *her*, I assume?

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Laying her letters upon the table on the left.*] From him.

STULKELEY.

Precisely ! [MISS STULKELEY *seats herself upon the settee on the left.*] My dear Joan, the airs of proprietorship he adopts towards this unfortunate young lady are insufferable.

MISS STULKELEY.

It doesn't appear to weigh on her spirits.

STULKELEY.

Nothing weighs on her spirits for any length of time. [*Leaving the fireplace, enthusiastically.*] Her spirits are proof even against what I can only describe as persecution.

MISS STULKELEY.

Yes, she has a buoyant disposition.

STULKELEY.

Which aggravates rather than excuses the offensiveness of Talbot's attitude. It's monstrous. [*Coming to her.*] Because—solely to gain her good graces!—he puts Miss Quarendon under a trifling obligation to him by taking Mr. Panmure's disgraceful conduct upon himself, he treats her as if she were his property—his pet-dog. I almost expect to hear him whistling for her.

MISS STULKELEY.

She whistles for *him* occasionally.

STULKELEY.

She whistles for everybody; a charming habit. [*Walking about.*] Ah, if I could invent a pretext for getting hold of his latch-key!

MISS STULKELEY.

His latch-key?

STULKELEY.

The key of this house—*my* house. We are never free of him now. I wonder he troubles to keep on his lodgings.

MISS STULKELEY.

It would annoy our servants terribly, to have to open the front-door to 'Talbot fifty times a day.

STULKELEY.

That is my object. They would show him that they resented it.

MISS STULKELEY.

They would show *us* that they resented it. [*In a level voice.*] Reginald——

STULKELEY.

[*Returning to her.*] Eh?

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Looking up at him.*] The truth is, you are envious of 'Talbot.

STULKELEY.

Envious?

MISS STULKELEY.

Jealous.

STULKELEY.

J-jealous!

MISS STULKELEY.

Mortally jealous. And shall I tell you why?

STULKELEY.

[*Consulting his watch, uncomfortably.*] Perhaps I ought not to have started this topic at a moment of extreme pressure.

MISS STULKELEY.

You are jealous of Talbot because you are in love with the girl yourself. [*He makes a movement.*] In love. Everything supports me. The radical change in you——!

STULKELEY.

[*Startled.*] Radical?

MISS STULKELEY.

I am not speaking politically. The alteration in your style of dressing—the flower in your button-hole—your demeanour in her presence! [*Rising.*] And it is having a bad effect on you.

STULKELEY.

In what way, pray?

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Moving to the fireplace.*] Your speech last night at the Seventy Club—tame and unconvincing.

STULKELEY.

The newspapers report me most inadequately.

MISS STULKELEY.

Their circulation has to be considered.

STULKELEY.

[*Biting his nails.*] I made a hit again with cocoa.

MISS STULKELEY.

That cocoa of yours seems always to be simmering on the hob.

STULKELEY.

[*Sitting in the chair by the table on the left and throwing one leg over the other.*] Upon my word, Joan——

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Facing him.*] Reginald, acknowledge it.

STULKELEY.

[*Irritably.*] Acknowledge *what*?

MISS STULKELEY.

Your love for Josepha.

STULKELEY.

[*With a wave of the hand.*] It is impossible for anybody to be in her society——

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Approaching him.*] Let us avoid generalities. [*At his side.*] I will be frank with you. From a common-sense point of view, your marrying Miss Quarendon

would be open to every objection. [*Softening.*] But, on the other hand, she's a sweet thing——

STULKELEY.

[*Eagerly.*] You like her ?

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Forgetfully.*] It is impossible for any one to be in her society——

STULKELEY.

Tsch ! Generalities !

MISS STULKELEY.

Bless me, yes ! Very well, then, I—I admit——

STULKELEY.

You admit—— ?

MISS STULKELEY.

She is one of the few among my sex for whom I would willingly move my bedroom a floor higher.

STULKELEY.

[*Taking her hand.*] My dear Joan !

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Losing her composure.*] Oh, Reginald—— !

STULKELEY.

This is what I have been waiting for—a revelation of your feeling towards Josepha !

MISS STULKELEY.

I—I confess——

STULKELEY.

Confess——?

MISS STULKELEY.

To a dread I have had of late years—a terror——

STULKELEY.

Terror?

MISS STULKELEY.

That a time might come when you would place a woman in authority in this house—a middle-aged, unpliant creature——!

STULKELEY.

I understand. But Josepha——!

MISS STULKELEY.

Exactly. Listen to me. You value my advice?

STULKELEY.

Value it!

MISS STULKELEY.

Bring matters to a head at once, and stop Talbot from trampling over you.

STULKELEY.

[*In a flutter.*] At once; at once. [*Anxiously.*] This paltry service he has rendered her! Who knows to what extent it has captured her imagination, eh?

MISS STULKELEY.

There's the great danger!

STULKELEY.

[*Depressed.*] Oh, my dear Joan!

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Listening.*] Sssh! [STULKELEY jumps up. MISS STULKELEY touches his arm significantly and drops her voice to a whisper.] I'll take my exercise alone this morning.

[*She moves to the fireplace as JOSEPHA enters breathlessly, still dressed for walking, followed by WOODHOUSE. WOODHOUSE, who is wearing no overcoat, also has a flower in his button-hole and is aggressively self-satisfied and patronising in his bearing. By an accident, his keys, which he carries at the end of a chain, are hanging at his side.*

JOSEPHA.

[*Running to MISS STULKELEY.*] Sorry to have been so long, dearest. It's Madame Deniseau's fault; she is such a chatterbox. Go and put your things on. There's a sun in the sky that belongs to last summer. [*To WOODHOUSE.*] Isn't there?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Advancing.*] Belongs to last summer! Ha, ha! Capital! Ha, ha!

JOSEPHA.

[*To MISS STULKELEY.*] Make haste! I'll help you to tie your veil.

WOODHOUSE.

[*To MISS STULKELEY.*] Yes, look sharp, Joan; I'll

trot you both into the Park. [*Involuntarily, STULKELEY gives a short, ironical laugh. As he does so, he catches sight of WOODHOUSE'S keys and his eyes gleam. WOODHOUSE turns to him.*] Eh?

STULKELEY.

N-nothing.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Turning from him.*] Thought you spoke.

MISS STULKELEY

[*To JOSEPHA.*] Josepha, I am going out by myself this morning.

JOSEPHA.

By yourself!

MISS STULKELEY.

Yes; I've a particular reason for desiring you to remain indoors.

JOSEPHA.

[*Wonderingly.*] Particular reason! What reason?

MISS STULKELEY.

No questions. [*Patting her cloak caressingly.*] I sha'n't be more than an hour.

WOODHOUSE.

[*To MISS STULKELEY.*] Oh, I'll amuse her while you're gone. [*MISS STULKELEY and JOSEPHA move to the door, the former pausing to pick up her letters. STULKELEY has seated himself upon the settee on the left and is trying to withstand the temptation to abstract the latch-key from WOODHOUSE'S key-ring. WOOD-*

HOUSE, *feeling a tug, turns to him again.*] What are you up to, my dear chap?

STULKELEY.

[Offering him the bunch of keys.] Your keys are dangling, Talbot.

WOODHOUSE.

[Pocketing his keys, suspiciously.] Oh—thank you.
[Crossing to the right.] Er—Joan.

MISS STULKELEY.

[Who is leaving the room with JOSEPHIA.] Yes?

WOODHOUSE.

[Importantly.] Give me a minute, will you?

MISS STULKELEY.

[To JOSEPHIA.] Excuse me, dear. *[In a lower tone.]*
Come down when you've taken off your hat and coat.
[With a nod, JOSEPHIA withdraws and MISS STULKELEY closes the door.]

WOODHOUSE

[To STULKELEY.] Stay where you are, Reggie.
[STULKELEY looks up and glares.] Sit down, my dear Joan.

MISS STULKELEY.

[Coldly.] You heard me say I am going out, Talbot.

WOODHOUSE.

[His back to the fire and his coat-tails over his arms.]
Yes, that's why I think it an excellent opportunity to

have this little jaw with you. As you are going out, leaving Miss Quarendon at home——

MISS STULKELEY.

What has Miss Quarendon——?

WOODHOUSE.

Oh, please, dear lady, suffer me to approach this matter in my own way. [MISS STULKELEY *sits abruptly in the chair by the table on the left.*] Thank you. Now, I want to do everything, you know, in a correct and formal manner. Miss Quarendon has no parents, or I should address myself to *them*. A week or so ago I should have applied to Mr. and Mrs. Panmure for permission——

MISS STULKELEY.

Permission!

WOODHOUSE.

To propose marriage to Miss Quarendon. [STULKELEY *and* MISS STULKELEY *stiffen themselves suddenly.*] To-day that is, on the face of it, unnecessary. [*Opening his arms.*] So what is my course of procedure?

MISS STULKELEY.

Your——course of——?

WOODHOUSE.

Why, regarding you both as being, in a sense, the dear child's guardians, I come to *you*. You have given her the protection of your friendship and the shelter of your very comfortable establishment. [*Advancing.*] And, by-the-by, while I am about it, let me express my grateful appreciation of your kindness to Josepha

—a kindness which, naturally, I feel all the more deeply——

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Steadily.*] Talbot——

WOODHOUSE.

[*Going to her.*] Eh?

MISS STULKELEY.

Josepha—Josepha doesn't suspect——?

WOODHOUSE.

Suspect?

MISS STULKELEY.

That you have an affection for her?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Shrugging his shoulders complacently.*] What she suspects——

MISS STULKELEY.

But you haven't breathed a syllable——?

WOODHOUSE.

My dear Joan, I've told you, I wish to conduct this affair with the utmost formality.

MISS STULKELEY.

My motive for asking is—that Reginald—[*looking at STULKELEY*] Reginald——

WOODHOUSE.

[*In a tone of polite inquiry.*] Reginald——?

MISS STULKELEY.

[*To* WOODHOUSE.] My dear brother——

STULKELEY.

[*Throatily.*] Yes, *I*—I myself——

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Pointing to* STULKELEY.] *He*——

WOODHOUSE.

[*With an exaggerated air of incredulousness.*] Oh, no, not really! [*STULKELEY and MISS STULKELEY rise simultaneously.*] No, no; do let's be serious.

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Walking away to the back.*] Serious!

STULKELEY.

[*Crossing to the fireplace.*] Serious!

WOODHOUSE.

[*On the left.*] Oh, my dear Reggie—oh, my dear Joan—this is grotesque!

STULKELEY.

Grotesque!

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Coming to* WOODHOUSE.] So grotesque is it that I have expressly arranged to leave Josepha at home this morning in order that Reginald may declare himself.

WOODHOUSE.

Grotesque!

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Formidably.*] Don't you use that word again, Talbot; I won't have it.

WOODHOUSE.

Gro—[*meeting her eye*] gro—! Gro—ridiculous!

STULKELEY.

[*Joining MISS STULKELEY.*] Anyhow, it is my intention to speak to Miss Quarendon without delay.

MISS STULKELEY.

Without delay.

WOODHOUSE.

Oh, but I put it to you—two mature, usually sensible people—[*sitting upon the settee on the left, nursing his leg*] I put it to *you*, Joan——

MISS STULKELEY.

[*With asperity.*] You needn't.

WOODHOUSE.

[*To MISS STULKELEY.*] I *put* it to you. Supposing I were to efface myself, if one could suppose anything so wildly improbable—but supposing I *were* to, and Josey could be induced to look favourably on darling old Reggie—what a calamity!

STULKELEY.

Calamity!

MISS STULKELEY.

Nothing of the sort !

WOODHOUSE.

I abhor our vulgar English proverbs —I really do—
but May and December, you know !

STULKELEY.

[*Holly.*] I beg your pardon !

WOODHOUSE.

Worse ! May and December twelvemonth !

STULKELEY.

Talbot, you're rude !

MISS STULKELEY.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] June and October at the outside !
Josepha is twenty-seven, Reginald forty-two.

WOODHOUSE.

And then, apart from *that*, Reggie and this dainty
little fairy ! Oh, gro—[*meeting* MISS STULKELEY'S *eye*
again] gro— ! Gro—absurd !

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Impatiently.*] Well, Miss Quarendon may be down
at any moment——

WOODHOUSE.

True. [*Looking at his watch.*] You will be absent for about an hour, you say, Joan?

MISS STULKELEY.

Why——?

WOODHOUSE.

I suggest that Reggie accompanies you—or that he goes for a stroll on his own account——

MISS STULKELEY.

[*To* WOODHOUSE.] Reginald?

WOODHOUSE.

Allowing me at least twenty minutes——

STULKELEY.

[*Not comprehending.*] Twenty minutes?

MISS STULKELEY.

[*To* WOODHOUSE.] What for?

WOODHOUSE.

For my interview with Josepha.

STULKELEY.

Not at all!

MISS STULKELEY.

What next!

WOODHOUSE.

Oh, Reggie will come next.

STULKELEY.

[*Pacing the room at the back.*] Audacious !

MISS STULKELEY.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] No, no ; *you* will go for a stroll, Talbot, and if, after that—though it is scarcely conceivable——

STULKELEY.

[*Halting.*] Quite so ; if, after I have had *my* interview with Miss Quarendon, there remains the faintest ray of hope for Talbot——

WOODHOUSE.

[*Rising, genuinely indignant.*] My dear Reggie—my dear Joan—you make me blush for you ; you do, positively.

STULKELEY.

Blush ?

MISS STULKELEY.

Blush !

WOODHOUSE.

Blush. [*Crossing to the fireplace.*] To take such an unfair advantage of me ; a relative, too—a first cousin ! It's shabby to a degree ; it is, really.

STULKELEY and MISS STULKELEY.

Unfair—— !

WOODHOUSE.

Distinctly unfair ! [*Facing them.*] This is my reward for behaving in an honourable, high-minded fashion. Oh, it's lamentable !

MISS STULKELEY.

I don't deny——

STULKELEY.

[*Resuming his walk.*] Neither of us denies——

WOODHOUSE.

You *can't*. You are perfectly well aware that I could have offered marriage to Miss Quarendon without paying you the compliment of consulting *you*. This morning, for example, in Sloane Street! The east side of Sloane Street is admirably adapted for that kind o' thing.

STULKELEY.

[*Now on the left, in front of the settee, disturbed.*]
Joan——

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Turning to him.*] Eh?

STULKELEY.

[*His hands in his pockets, guiltily.*] Talbot's behaviour *has* been irreproachable, undoubtedly.

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Sharing STULKELEY's uneasiness.*] Oh, undoubtedly.

STULKELEY.

[*Rattling his money, feebly.*] If some sort of compromise could be arrived at——

MISS STULKELEY.

Compromise?

STULKELEY.

[*Unconsciously producing a piece of money and gently tossing it over in his palm.*] Very little is accomplished in these days without compromise.

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Grasping his arm and pointing to the coin.*] Oh, but you wouldn't——!

STULKELEY.

[*Hastily pocketing the coin.*] No, no; not with a coin.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Raising his hands.*] Oh, pot-house! Pot-house!

STULKELEY.

Would it be equally objectionable if—ah—if Talbot and I were to draw lots——?

MISS STULKELEY.

Lots?

STULKELEY.

To decide who shall be the first to—er——

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Turning to* WOODHOUSE.] Talbot——?

WOODHOUSE.

Lots!

STULKELEY.

[*Thoughtfully.*] Two pieces of paper dropped into a vase—a number written upon each of them——

WOODHOUSE.

[*Walking away to the back in disgust.*] Good heavens, a sweepstake!

STULKELEY.

[*To WOODHOUSE, violently.*] Confound it, man, is there no satisfying you!

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Warmly.*] A most generous concession!

STULKELEY.

[*Striding to the fireplace and taking up a position there firmly.*] Very well, then! I adhere to my—and my sister's—original plan.

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Sitting upon the settee on the left.*] We adhere to our original plan.

STULKELEY.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] Which leaves me no alternative, my dear fellow, but to request you to withdraw.

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Folding her arms.*] To request you to withdraw, Talbot.

WOODHOUSE.

Ha! [*At the door.*] I repeat, I blush for you.

STULKELEY.

[*With a stately bow.*] I am greatly obliged.

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Bridling.*] We are greatly obliged.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Opening the door.*] Blush for you.

MISS STULKELEY.

So that you blush in the street, Talbot——

WOODHOUSE.

[*Wrathfully.*] Ah——!

[*He goes out slamming the door. STULKELEY advances to MISS STULKELEY and she, with a sigh of relief, rises and embraces him.*

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Kissing him on both cheeks.*] Reginald—my dear brother——!

[WOODHOUSE returns. MISS STULKELEY and STULKELEY separating hastily, regard him with surprise and displeasure. WOODHOUSE closes the door and comes forward.

STULKELEY.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] W—w—what——?

MISS STULKELEY.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] Talbot?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Calmly.*] I consent.

STULKELEY.

Consent !

MISS STULKELEY.

You consent ?

WOODHOUSE.

A vase—two pieces of paper——

STULKELEY.

[*Disappointed.*] By all means.

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Frigidly.*] Certainly.

WOODHOUSE.

On one condition.

MISS STULKELEY.

Condition ?

STULKELEY.

I am not *sure* that Talbot is entitled to dictate——

MISS STULKELEY.

[*To STULKELEY.*] Wait. [*To WOODHOUSE.*] May we hear—— ?

WOODHOUSE.

Whichever of us first proposes to Miss Quarendon shall inform her that the other intends to do the same thing immediately afterwards.

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Knitting her brows.*] Whichever of you——

STULKELEY.

[*Also frowning.*] First proposes——

MISS STULKELEY.

Shall inform Josepha——

STULKELEY.

That the other——

MISS STULKELEY.

Immediately afterwards—— ?

STULKELEY.

[*After a short pause.*] Joan—— !

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Tapping her forehead with her fingers.*] Let me think.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Testily.*] Oh, my dear lady, can't you see that my proviso is as much in Reggie's interests as my own ?

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Shutting her eyes.*] Yes, I do see——

STULKELEY.

[*His hand to his head.*] Now, how would it operate ?

MISS STULKELEY.

At the first glance it's rather complex, but——

STULKELEY.

[*Again appealing to MISS STULKELEY.*] Eh——h ?

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Nodding slowly.*] Yes—yes, we—we agree.

STULKELEY.

[*Still extremely doubtful.*] We agree unhesitatingly.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Looking round about him.*] A vase——? [*He fetches a vase which is standing upon a cabinet at the back. Absently, STULKELEY takes another vase from the mantel-piece, while MISS STULKELEY removes yet another from the console-table, and the three advance and meet in the middle of the room.*] Oh, my dear friends, we are not a troupe of conjurers!

STULKELEY.

[*Replacing his vase upon the mantelpiece, nettled.*] There is no harm done, my dear Talbot.

WOODHOUSE.

* [*Putting back his vase, tartly.*] Not the slightest.

STULKELEY.

[*To MISS STULKELEY.*] Joan, two slips of paper. [*MISS STULKELEY deposits her vase upon the writing-table, and, seating herself at the table, tears two slips from a sheet of paper and prepares to write.*] The figure “I” upon that; [*MISS STULKELEY writes, first upon one piece of paper, then upon the other, according to his directions.*] upon that the figure “II.”

WOODHOUSE.

[*At the further side of the writing-table.*] The one who draws Number One——?

STULKELEY.

[*Bowing in assent.*] Yes.

WOODHOUSE.

[*To MISS STULKELEY.*] Fold them.

STULKELEY.

[*As she does so.*] Of course, fold them.

WOODHOUSE.

Drop them into the vase.

STULKELEY.

[*Resenting WOODHOUSE'S tone of authority.*] Obviously.

[*MISS STULKELEY drops the pieces of paper into the vase and rises. Carrying the vase, she moves to the middle of the room. The men follow her.*]

WOODHOUSE.

[*To MISS STULKELEY.*] Shake it up. [*She gives the vase a shake and, blinded and choked with dust, coughs painfully and blinks.*] Pardon.

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Giving the vase to WOODHOUSE and wiping her eyes.*] Our neglectful housemaids——!

WOODHOUSE.

[*To STULKELEY.*] Which of us——?

STULKELEY.

[*Reliering WOODHOUSE of the vase, magnanimously.*]
You.

[*WOODHOUSE plunges his hand into the vase, which is a narrow-necked one, and is unable to withdraw it.*]

MISS STULKELEY.

[*At his side.*] Oh, dear!

STULKELEY.

[*Solicitously, tugging at the vase.*] Oh, dear; oh, dear!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Wincing.*] Tsssh!

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Pulling at WOODHOUSE's arm.*] How unfortunate!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Lowering at STULKELEY.*] Did you guess this would happen, Reggie?

STULKELEY.

On my honour, Talbot——!

WOODHOUSE.

The vase will have to be broken.

MISS STULKELEY.

Break my vase! No!

WOODHOUSE.

My dear Joan, you don't think I am going through life with this attached to me, do you? [*Ultimately, with a jerk, he extricates his hand, his elbow hitting MISS STULKELEY, who has turned away distractedly, between the shoulders.*] Pardon. [*Gripping his hand and then examining it with concern.*] Tssh! [*MISS STULKELEY, thoroughly upset, retires to the back as WOODHOUSE discovers that he has possessed himself of one of the pieces of paper.*] Tsssh! Tscha! [*Unfolding the paper.*] Dash, and I've drawn the wrong number! [*Crumpling the paper and flinging it away.*] Tscha! [*Making for the door.*] Drawn the filthy wrong number and grazed my knuckles badly! [*As he reaches the door, it is opened and JOSEPHA enters.*] Pardon.

[*He departs, closing the door, and JOSEPHA goes to MISS STULKELEY.*]

JOSEPHA

[*Who has taken off her outdoor things.*] You haven't started yet, dearest!

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Passing JOSEPHA.*] I'm only just at liberty.

JOSEPHA.

[*Following her.*] Mayn't I help you with your hat?

MISS STULKELEY.

No, no; Gillmore will attend to me. [*Turning to JOSEPHA.*] Stay here.

JOSEPHA.

[*Looking into MISS STULKELEY's face.*] Why, is anything the matter?

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Glancing at STULKELEY, who has moved across to the left.*] I—I fancy my brother Reginald has something to say to you.

JOSEPHA.

[*Alarmed.*] Oh! What have I done?

MISS STULKELEY.

Shall I tell you?

JOSEPHA.

Y—yes.

MISS STULKELEY.

Made the house bright and cheerful for a week.

[*MISS STULKELEY kisses JOSEPHA fondly, picks up her letters again, and goes out.*]

JOSEPHA.

[*Looking from STULKELEY to the closed door and from the door to STULKELEY, puzzled.*] I—I'm afraid I must have been up to some naughty trick or other. [*Advancing a step or two.*] Have I?

[*He turns to her, unconscious of the fact that he is still holding the vase.*]

STULKELEY.

[*Nervously.*] Er—Miss Quarendon——

JOSEPHA.

E-eh ?

STULKELEY.

[*Hugging the vase to his breast.*] My sister is—ah—correct in her surmise that I—er——

JOSEPHA.

[*Eyeing the vase.*] What are you doing with *that* ?

STULKELEY.

With what ?

JOSEPHA.

[*Pointing.*] That thing.

STULKELEY.

Good gracious ! Thank you. [*He is about to stand the vase upon the table on the left when he reflects, changes his mind, and turns to her again. She edges away from him, open-mouthed.*] No ; this will assist me to—ah—to explain.

JOSEPHA.

[*Growing more and more frightened by his manner.*] T-t-to explain ?

STULKELEY.

[*Coming to her and presenting the mouth of the vase to her.*] Dip your hand into it.

JOSEPHA.

Dip my hand into it !

STULKELEY.

[*Gazing at her earnestly.*] Yours is a small hand—a delicately shaped hand.

JOSEPHA.

[*Putting her hands behind her.*] Oh, I—I don't know.

STULKELEY.

There is no danger of *your* having to go through life with this attached to you

JOSEPHA.

[*Her fright increasing.*] Oh, M-M-Mr. Stulkeley——!

STULKELEY.

Dip your hand into it.

JOSEPHA.

Aren't you well?

STULKELEY.

Quite. [*Shaking the vase invitingly.*] Come.

JOSEPHA.

W-w-what for?

STULKELEY.

You will find a slip of paper at the bottom.

JOSEPHA.

S-s-slip of paper?

STULKELEY.

Insignificant in itself, but big with fate. [*Fear-*

fully, she inserts her hand in the vase and draws out a piece of paper.] Unfold it. [*She obeys, with trembling fingers.*] What is the figure written on it?

JOSEPHA.

[*Correcting him.*] Figures. [*Reading.*] “Three pounds, eight, and four-pence.”

STULKELEY.

[*His eyes bolting.*] Three pounds——!

JOSEPHA.

It's a bill. [*Showing it to him.*] “Marshall and Snelgrove.”

STULKELEY.

Bless me! How has that got there? That's not the paper I mean. [*She lays the bill on the writing-table and, again diving her hand into the vase, fishes up another piece of paper.*] That must be it.

JOSEPHA.

[*Unfolding it.*] “I.” [*Looking at him.*] One?

STULKELEY.

[*Intensely.*] Miss Quarendon—Josepha—that apparently unimportant document gives me the right of taking precedence over my cousin Talbot in telling you that it is in your power to make me—[*confused*] or him—to make either of us—the happiest of men.

JOSEPHA.

[*Staring at him.*] Mr. Stulkeley!

STULKELEY.

Yes, Woodhouse and I—I can't justify the proceeding, but it was forced upon me—Woodhouse and I have been drawing lots to decide who should be the first to lay his heart at your feet.

JOSEPHA.

[*Faintly.*] Oh!

STULKELEY.

He, as I have hinted, has drawn the wrong number ; and therefore—excuse me——

[*He breaks off, to get rid of the case, which he replaces upon the console-table, while she, with a woeful face, sits upon the fantail-stool.*]

JOSEPHA.

Oh! Oh!

STULKELEY.

[*Returning to the middle of the room.*] Josepha, I love you.

JOSEPHA.

[*Dropping her head upon her hands.*] Oh-h-h-h!

STULKELEY.

[*Coming to her and standing beside her.*] I love you utterly, entirely, with every faculty of my being. Perhaps, under an existing arrangement, I ought to add—for I wish to be strictly impartial—perhaps I ought to add that it is possible that my cousin loves you in very much the same proportion. But, as he will propose to you in person shortly after I have

finished, I beg you to bestow your whole attention, for the moment, upon myself.

JOSEPHA.

[*Rocking herself to and fro, in a murmur.*] Oh, my; oh, my!

STULKELEY.

Josepha, it is a common failing with a man who is in love to invest the object of his devotion with every noble and gracious quality; and terrible in too many instances is the disenchantment that awaits him. In the present case, however, I believe that in ascribing to you the enjoyment of mental attributes of a superior order, and an equability of temper which is as rare as it is engaging——

JOSEPHA.

[*Looking up at him piteously.*] Are you speaking now for Mr. Woodhouse or for yourself?

STULKELEY.

[*With some heat.*] No, no; I've told you, I've done with Woodhouse. You can't have been following me. [*Off the line.*] Er—you've thrown me out—an equability of temper—[*recovering himself*] which is as rare as it is engaging——

JOSEPHA.

[*Bursting into tears.*] Oh! Ho, ho, ho, ho!

STULKELEY.

Josepha!

JOSEPHA.

Oh, how unlucky I am!

STULKELEY.

Unlucky!

JOSEPHA.

Oh, I thought I was 'in harbour again, and now this has cropped up!

STULKELEY.

[*Agitatedly.*] This has cropped up!

JOSEPHA.

[*Rising and walking away to the left.*] Ah, only last night, before I got into bed, I went down on my hands and knees and put my lips to the carpet!

STULKELEY.

To the carpet!

JOSEPHA.

The carpet of my beautiful, snug, cosy room.

STULKELEY.

In heaven's name, why the carpet?

JOSEPHA.

Out of gratitude for finding myself in your care, and your sister's! [*Sinking into a chair.*] And now I'm adrift once more. Oh! Oh! Oh! *How* unlucky I am!

STULKELEY.

[*Distressed.*] Josepha——

JOSEPHA.

Oh, don't!

STULKELEY.

Even if I am unacceptable to you, you can continue to kiss your present carpet until some more fortunate individual—Woodhouse or another——

JOSEPHA.

[*Sitting upright, sobbing.*] How c-c-can I?

STULKELEY.

It seems to me to be sheer waste; but what's to prevent your doing so?

JOSEPHA.

S-s-suppose—s-s-suppose Miss Stulkeley came to know that you—that you——!

STULKELEY.

Came to know! She *does* know.

JOSEPHA.

Does she! [*Opening her eyes widely.*] And about little Mr. Woodhouse also?

STULKELEY.

Tsch! [*Sourly.*] And about him also.

JOSEPHA.

And about the drawing lots?

STULKELEY.

She assisted at it.

JOSEPHA.

[*Rising, her face clearing.*] Oh, and that's why she's gone out alone this morning!

STULKELEY.

[*Coming to her.*] Certainly.

JOSEPHA.

[*Looking at the piece of paper which is still in her hand—falteringly.*] And was she—pleased—or angry—when you—drew this?

STULKELEY.

Pleased. [*Hopefully.*] I've never seen a woman exhibit so much satisfaction.

JOSEPHA.

[*Shrewdly.*] Oh, but you didn't draw it. I did.

STULKELEY.

As my cousin had drawn the losing number, there was no necessity—.

JOSEPHA.

[*Nodding.*] Ah, no; of course. [*With a light, tender laugh.*] Ho, ho! Poor little man! [*Eyeing STULKELEY askance.*] But his turn'll come, won't it?

STULKELEY.

[*Chilled.*] By-and-by.

JOSEPHA.

[*Meditatively.*] Ah, he's been *such* a brick to me.

STULKELEY.

[*Breathing hard.*] A-a-a brick?

JOSEPHA.

A trump! That was fine of him—his sacrificing himself for me at The Clewers—wasn't it?

STULKELEY.

[*Wretchedly.*] Er—extremely.

JOSEPHA.

[*Softly, drying her eyes.*] Was he very crushed just now, when he fished out the wrong number?

STULKELEY.

Crushed! Literally! [*With malice.*] A most ludicrous business—his hand got stuck in the vase.

JOSEPHA.

Got stuck in the vase!

STULKELEY

Stuck fast.

JOSEPHA.

[*Unable to restrain her merriment.*] No!

STULKELEY.

We had the greatest difficulty—Joan and I——

JOSEPHA.

Ho, ho, ho! How did you——? Ha, ha, ha, ha!

STULKELEY.

I tugged at the vase, Joan pulled at his elbow——

JOSEPHA.

[*In a fit of laughter.*] Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho——!

STULKELEY.

[*Enjoying his success.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha! [*Taking her hand and stroking it.*] That's why I remarked that your perfect little hand——

JOSEPHA.

Ho, ho! I wondered!—— Ha, ha, ha, ha!

STULKELEY.

Ha, ha, ha!—— [*Suddenly.*] Sssh!

[*She sobers herself instantly as STULKELEY slowly turns his head in the direction of the folding-doors.*]

JOSEPHA.

[*In a whisper.*] What——?

STULKELEY.

[*To JOSEPHA, dropping his voice.*] Did you hear anything?

JOSEPHA.

[*Shaking her head.*] No.

STULKELEY.

[*Gravely.*] Josepha——

JOSEPHA.

Eh?

STULKELEY.

Surely my cousin Talbot has not been so despicably mean——!

JOSEPHA.

Mean——?

STULKELEY.

As to creep into that room——!

JOSEPHA.

[*Shocked.*] Oh, no!

STULKELEY.

And put his ear to the keyhole!

JOSEPHA.

[*Suppressing a whistle.*] Whew-w-w!

STULKELEY.

The understanding was that he, too, was to take the air.

JOSEPHA.

[*Sharply.*] Go on talking. [*In a high voice, moving to the writing-table.*] What brilliant weather we're having, aren't we?

STULKELEY.

[*Watching her in astonishment.*] Delightful.

JOSEPHA.

[*Taking a long quill-pen from the inkstand.*] We generally get a blue sky and plenty of sunshine after snow, don't we?

STULKELEY.

It's not—ah—unusual.

JOSEPHA.

[*Edging towards the folding-doors, humming discordantly.*] Tra, la, la, la——! [*Giving STULKELEY a mischievous look.*] Tra, la——! [*Introducing the end of the pen into the keyhole.*] Tra, la, la——!

STULKELEY.

Josey——!

JOSEPHA.

Ha, ha! [*Thrusting the pen through the keyhole.*] Ha, ha, ha——! [*There is a sound from the adjoining room as of the overturning of a chair.*] Oh!

STULKELEY.

[*Going to her.*] What have you done?

JOSEPHA.

[*Horried.*] Oh, why didn't you stop me!

[*She is about to unlock the centre leaf of the folding-doors when GRANT, a manservant, enters, carrying a salver upon which is a heap of visiting cards. JOSEPHA retreats to the fireplace as STULKELEY examines the cards.*]

STULKELEY.

[*Taking up the cards indiscriminately, one by one.*]
Mrs. Panmure—Miss Anstice—Mr. Hebblethwaite—
Mr. Panmure—Mr. Hugh Loring—Mrs. Hebblethwaite—
Mr. Panmure—Mr. Hebblethwaite—Mrs. Panmure—
Mr. Hugh Loring—Mrs. Hebblethwaite

—Miss Anstice—— [To GRANT, *bewildered.*] They're not——?

GRANT.

Yessir; downstairs, sir.

STULKELEY.

All——?

GRANT.

Several, sir. I said Miss Stulkeley's out walking, sir; but they'd like to see you and Miss Quarendon, and Mr. Woodhouse.

STULKELEY.

[*After a glance at JOSEPHA.*] Oh—show them up. Grant——

GRANT.

[*At the door.*] Yessir?

STULKELEY.

Has Mr. Woodhouse gone out again?

GRANT.

B'lieve not, sir. His hat's in the hall.

STULKELEY.

[*Grimly.*] Find him.

GRANT.

Yessir.

[GRANT *withdraws, with the salver and cards, as JOSEPHA throws the pen into the fire and comes to STULKELEY.*

JOSEPHA.

What an odd call!

STULKELEY.

Call! It's a Conference!

JOSEPHA.

[*Clinging to STULKELEY's arm.*] They haven't come to ask me to go back to The Clewlers, have they?

STULKELEY.

[*Soothingly.*] No, no.

JOSEPHA.

I adore Lottie; [*shuddering*] but Mr. Panmure——!

STULKELEY.

[*Hurriedly.*] Josey—before these people appear—if you could give me a word of encouragement——!

JOSEPHA.

Encouragement?

STULKELEY.

Tell me that I may hope——

JOSEPHA.

Hope! [*Repulsing him.*] When perhaps you've made me hurt that little hero!

[*The door re-opens and GRANT ushers in MRS. PANMURE, MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE, HEBBLETHWAITE, PANMURE, DULCIE, and LORING. MRS. PANMURE's expression is very glum,*

but PANMURE has a smug, sanctified air. The others seem to be on excellent terms with themselves, the HEBBLETHWAITES looking particularly contented and jolly. GRANT retires, closing the door.

STULKELEY.

[*Shaking hands with MRS. PANMURE.*] My sister will be very sorry. [*Shaking hands with MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] How do you do?

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Going to JOSEPHA, coldly.*] How are you, Josepha?

JOSEPHA.

[*Kissing MRS. PANMURE, shyly.*] How are you, Lottie? [*MRS. PANMURE accepts JOSEPHA'S kiss unresponsively and moves to the fireplace as JOSEPHA shakes hands with MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.*] How do you do, Mrs. Hebblethwaite?

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Loftily, turning away to the settee on the left.*] Thank you; I am in perfect health.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*After greeting STULKELEY.*] Coming down on you like an avalanche, hey? [*Seeing JOSEPHA.*] Ah, and here's little Miss Jo——!

[*He is about to shake hands with her when he thinks better of it and, nodding to JOSEPHA, joins MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.* PANMURE,

who has been received in a distant manner by STULKELEY, approaches JOSEPHA while STULKELEY is shaking hands with DULCIE and LORING.

PANMURE.

[*To JOSEPHA, in an oily tone.*] I trust you are well, Miss Quarendon—[*she gives him a limp hand*] and happy—oh, happy—in your new, temporary home.

JOSEPHA.

Exceedingly.

PANMURE.

We are *all* much happier than when we saw you last.

[*He moves away as DULCIE advances to JOSEPHA and proffers a finger.*

DULCIE.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] How d'ye do?

LORING.

[*On the left, nodding to JOSEPHA.*] How'r'yer, Miss Quarendon?

STULKELEY.

[*To everybody.*] Pray sit down; pray sit down. [MR. and MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *seat themselves upon the settee on the left, DULCIE and LORING in the chairs at the end of the settee, PANMURE in the chair by the table on the left, and JOSEPHA upon the fauteuil-stool.*] Er—my sister will be sorry.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Who has been gazing into the fire, to STULKELEY.*] Oh, this is not an ordinary visit of friendship, Mr. Stulkeley.

STULKELEY.

[*Puzzled.*] No?

MRS. PANMURE.

As you may gather from the hour at which it is paid. And as Miss Stulkeley is not so intimately connected with a certain event as the rest of us, it is better, in my opinion, that she should be out of the way.

STULKELEY.

[*Apprehensively.*] Dear me!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Inquiringly.*] Is Mr. Woodhouse——?

STULKELEY.

I've sent for him.

MRS. PANMURE.

We won't lose time. [*To PANMURE.*] Are you ready, St. John?

PANMURE.

[*Sanctimoniously.*] Oh, more than ready; *more* than ready.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To STULKELEY.*] My husband is here, Mr. Stulkeley, at the suggestion—at the command—of Mr. Pruyn,

the rector of Polehampton, to perform an act of expiation.

STULKELEY.

Expiation !

MRS. PANMURE.

Of self-abasement. [*Sitting upon the settee before the fire.*] Uncle Alfred—— ?

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Clearing his throat.*] Ahem ! [*To STULKELEY.*] The fact is, Stulkeley, that our friend Panmure—my nephew-in-law—[*chuckling*] ha, ha !—has been found out.

PANMURE.

No, no ; not found out [*Casting his eyes up to the ceiling.*] He has confessed.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Well, he confessed *after* he was found out. Ha, ha !

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Shivering.*] Oh, please don't laugh, uncle.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To MRS. PANMURE.*] Your uncle is a fluent speaker, Lottie, *if* he is allowed his own methods.

STULKELEY.

[*Sitting in the chair at the writing-table.*] Confessed !

HEBBLETHWAITE.

To being the chap who kissed Miss Quarendon.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Emphatically.*] Who kissed Miss Quarendon.

DULCIE.

Kissed Miss Quarendon.

LORING.

Kissed Miss Quarendon.

JOSEPHA.

[*Involuntarily giving a shrill, prolonged whistle.*]
Whew-w-w-w!

[*The men are startled, the women look at*
JOSEPHA indignantly.

MRS. PANMURE.

Josepha!

JOSEPHA.

[*Clapping her hand to her mouth.*] Oh, my!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Her head bowed.*] Yes, it was my husband who
kissed Josepha.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Chuckling again.*] Ha, ha! Kissed little Jo—!
[*Finding his wife's eye upon him.*] Kissed Miss
Quarendon.

PANMURE.

Yielded to temptation. [*Looking round.*] Oh, beware
of temptation, boys. Stulkeley—Hughie—[*pointedly*]
Alfred——

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Bristling.*] You needn't lay such stress on *Alfred*, St. John.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Nudging* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *affectionately.*] Ha, old lady!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Slipping her arm through* HEBBLETHWAITE'S.] Alfred has never given me a moment's anxiety; and never will.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Patting* MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE'S *hand and then rising and going to* STULKELEY.] You see, what's occurred is this. Kitts, the footman——

LORING.

[*Who has been preparing himself for an oratorical effort.*] Er—ah—before Hebblethwaite goes any further—I—er——

DULCIE.

[*To* LORING, *fondly.*] What is it, old thing?

LORING.

Before Hebblethwaite goes any further, I want it to be clearly understood that, though I've consented to be present at this act of—what-d'ye-call-it, him and me are not on friendly terms.

DULCIE.

[*To* LORING.] Him and me!

LORING.

Er—I and him.

DULCIE.

[*Prompting* LORING.] Hebblethwaite and I——

LORING.

Are not on friendly terms.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Pacificaly.*] Oh, come, Loring ! Come, come, come, come !

LORING.

[*To* HEBBLETHWAITE, *wagging his head.*] No, no ; not after the way you tried to land me in the ditch over Miss Quarendon.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*To* LORING.] Oh, Mr. Loring—— !

LORING.

[*Obstinately.*] No, no ; it ain't no good, Mrs. Heb. As the sayin' goes, the relations between me and Hebblethwaite are sprained ; and I'm not the sort——

DULCIE.

[*To* LORING.] Strained.

LORING.

[*To* DULCIE.] Hey ?

DULCIE.

Strained.

LORING.

What'd I say?

DULCIE.

You *said* your relations are *sprained*.

LORING.

Oh? Ain't much difference, is there?

MRS. PANMURE.

Go on, uncle.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Shrugging his shoulders good-humouredly.*] Well, this is what's occurred, Stulkeley. Kitts, the footman, was passing the hall door on that memorable Wednesday afternoon, and he heard the smashing of china.

PANMURE.

It was a plate she shied at me, Stulkeley. Miss Quarendon aimed a plate at me; [*to JOSEPHA*] didn't you?

JOSEPHA.

[*Under her breath.*] Oh!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Continuing.*] The smashing of china and voices raised above concert-pitch; and the lad took it into his head to hang about.

PANMURE.

I don't blame Miss Quarendon—not for *that*; I deserved it. It's a pity it struck the floor instead of hitting me.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

And presently he saw Miss Quarendon coming upstairs with a scared face ; and when he went into the hall, there was Panmure picking up the bits and shaking all over. And then Kitts told the story to Mrs. Meadows, the housekeeper ; and *she* goes to Lottie—[*addressing* STULKELEY] to Mrs. Panmure—with the broken crockery ; and Lottie begins to put two and two together ; and gradually the idea dawns on her—— !

PANMURE.

And then we had a chat, Lottie and I ; and I confessed—owned up like a man.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

H'm !

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *and* DULCIE.

H'm !

PANMURE.

Oh, the two or three days after that were dreadful. And they'd have gone on being dreadful if I hadn't called in Pruyn.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Ha, ha ! First-rate fellow—Pruyn !

PANMURE.

Oh, he's a champion. Alfred—boys—he's reformed me completely.

HEBBLETHWAITE

[*Grinning.*] Why, I thought that Lottie—— !

PANMURE.

Lottie began it, but Pruyn's put on the thingamy—the—the—the coping-stone.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Ha, ha, ha !

PANMURE.

No more selfish indulgences, with the poor sitting at my gates ! No more foul and expensive cigars !

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Knocked you off your smoking !

PANMURE.

Oh, boys, the pleasure of being knocked off your smoking ! [*Ecstatically.*] No more alcoholic liquids !

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Good lord !

PANMURE.

Oh, Alfred, the clearness of the brain of a total abstainer !

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*With a wry face.*] I dare say.

PANMURE.

[*Humbly.*] All the same, though, he's stopped my preaching for the future, Pruyn has.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

No more sermonettes !

PANMURE.

No. [*To JOSEPHIA, reproachfully.*] I gave him a full account of our discourse on St. Polycarp, Miss Quarendon.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE *and* DULCIE.

[*Looking severely at JOSEPHIA.*] Ah!

PANMURE.

And the awful catastrophe it ended in.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Ha, ha, ha!

PANMURE.

Lottie's thinking of making a clean sweep of the servants at The Clewers and getting in a fresh batch; [*to MRS. PANMURE*] aren't you, Lottie? [*Dropping into his earlier manner.*] Beasts! The old ones seemed determined not to forget that night.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Laughing with HEBBLETHWAITE.*] Ha, ha! You can hardly expect them to, St. John.

PANMURE.

[*Whimpering.*] I read the lessons to 'em now—common beasts!—and still I catch 'em tittering.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Wiping his eyes.*] I shall never forget it, I promise you.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Nor I. Oh, the scene——!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Ho, ho, ho, ho!

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Rolling from side to side.*] Ho, ho, ho!

LORING.

He, he, he!

DULCIE.

[*Throwing her head back.*] Ha, ha, ha!

STULKELEY.

[*Thoughtlessly.*] Ha, ha, ha!

JOSEPHA.

[*Suddenly, in a loud outburst.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha!

[*While the mirth is at its height, MRS. PANMURE starts up and confronts them.*]

MRS. PANMURE.

Be silent! Ah, how *can* you!

[*The laughter is at once checked and JOSEPHA rises and goes to MRS. PANMURE.*]

JOSEPHA.

[*Penitently.*] Lottie, dear, forgive me for laughing.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Turning from JOSEPHIA and advancing to HEBBLETHWAITE fiercely.*] Uncle—! [HEBBLETHWAITE *retires to the back of the settee on the left.*] St. John—[PANMURE and STULKELEY *rise*] we will catch the twelve-fifty from St. Pancras. [*To STULKELEY.*] Evidently Mr. Woodhouse is anxious to avoid meeting the woman he so wickedly misled. But my husband has obeyed the spirit of Mr. Pruy'n's direction that he should humble himself by making an admission of his depravity to a gathering of those principally concerned, and there is nothing left for us to do but to apologise for inflicting ourselves upon you. [*Offering her hand to STULKELEY as the others rise—icily.*] Good-bye.

PANMURE.

Oh, but—[*touching MRS. PANMURE'S shoulder*] Lottums——

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Turning to him.*] Yes?

PANMURE.

I *should* like Stulkeley just to see——

MRS. PANMURE.

What?

PANMURE.

[*Tapping his breast proudly.*] This, Lottums. Alfred and Corry haven't seen it either; nor Hughie.

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Compressing her lips.*] If you think it worth while——

PANMURE.

[*Beaming.*] Corry—boys—look ! [*He unbuttons his overcoat and, throwing it open with a flourish, displays the badge of the Guild of Fine Souls attached to the lapel of his undercoat.*] Pruyn—last night—a mark of appreciation, b'George !

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

The badge !

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Coming forward.*] Badge !

PANMURE.

Guild of Fine Souls.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

How very nice !

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Bravo !

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Examining the badge.*] Oh, but the brooch Lottie wore was gilt.

HEBBLETHWAITE.

What's that made of ?

PANMURE.

[*Sheepishly.*] Bronze, Alf.

MRS. PANMURE.

Imitation bronze—copper.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

Copper!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

Why copper?

MRS. PANMURE.

[*To PANMURE, bitterly.*] Tell them.

PANMURE.

[*Buttoning his overcoat, meekly.*] It's a badge of the Third Class, boys.

[*There is a general stir.* MRS. PANMURE moves towards the door while the others shake hands with STULKELEY and bid him good-bye. They have all reached the door when STULKELEY calls to them.

STULKELEY.

Mrs. Panmure — Mrs. Hebblethwaite—my dear Hebblethwaite——! [*Pointing to JOSEPHA who is leaning dejectedly upon the mantelpiece.*] Miss Quarendon!

HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Heartily.*] Confound it, yes! [*He bustles over to JOSEPHA, with MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE at his heels, and wrings her hand.*] Good-bye, my dear. Go'blessyer.

MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE.

[*Pushing HEBBLETHWAITE aside and shaking hands with JOSEPHA.*] Now, take my advice, Miss Quarendon. Give up governessing in private families; you're not in the least suited to it.

LORING.

[*Going to JOSEPHA, followed closely by DULCIE, and shaking hands with her.*] Er—ah—er——

DULCIE.

[*Elbowing him away and shaking JOSEPHA's hand.*] Get out, Hughie.

PANMURE.

[*Coming to JOSEPHA.*] Oh, Miss Quarendon, let this be a lesson to us never to forsake the straight for the crooked path. [*Taking her hand.*] Let us always, on our journey through life——

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Holding out her arms.*] Josey——!

JOSEPHA.

[*Sending PANMURE, with a blow on the chest, on to the settee.*] Ah! Lottie——!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Tottering to JOSEPHA, weeping.*] I'm sure I don't mean to be unkind——!

JOSEPHA.

[*Embracing MRS. PANMURE, hysterically.*] Ho, ho, ho! My old pal! My old schoolmate! Ho, ho, ho, ho!

[*The door opens and WOODHOUSE enters with an attempt at briskness. He is wearing a black shade, with some cotton-wool beneath it, over his right eye, and there are some patches of court-plaster on his knuckles.*

STULKELEY.

[*Aghast.*] My dear Talbot!

JOSEPHA.

[*Coming forward, in horror.*] Oh!

WOODHOUSE.

Coal-dust. Just as I was leaving the house—cart full of dam Wallsend——! Pardon. [*Adjusting his shade.*] Joan's maid found this in the medicine-cup-board.

STULKELEY and JOSEPHA.

[*To each other.*] Oh-h-h-h!

WOODHOUSE.

[*To MRS. PANMURE, extending his hand.*] My dear Mrs. Panmure! [*To the others.*] My dear friends! But what a delight!

MRS. PANMURE.

[*Not accepting his hand, sternly.*] Mr. Woodhouse——

WOODHOUSE.

[*Surprised.*] Eh?

MRS. PANMURE.

You will learn from your cousin the object of my husband's visit, and why I and my relatives—if I may include Mr. Loring under that denomination—why I and my relatives have accompanied him.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Wonderingly.*] Dear lady !

MRS. PANMURE.

[*With dignity.*] Sir, I am willing to credit you with having been animated by good intentions, but even good intentions do not justify the falsehood and deception lately practised by you while a guest under my roof.

PANMURE.

[*At her side.*] No, b'George ; gentleman's roof, b'George !

MRS. PANMURE.

And there is an oft-quoted dictum concerning good intentions which you would do well to ponder over at your leisure. [*Glancing at STULKELEY who is now on the left.*] How far Mr. Stulkeley was your confederate—if confederate he was—I do not seek to inquire. I will content myself with requesting that you will return to me, by registered-post, the emblem of purity which you so impudently obtained and are so unworthy to wear. [*Inclining her head.*] If ever we meet again, it will be as strangers.

[*STULKELEY opens the door for her and she passes out. PANMURE winks solemnly at WOODHOUSE and follows his wife. Then comes MRS. HEBBLETHWAITE, who gives WOODHOUSE a frosty bow, and HEBBLETHWAITE who, with a silent chuckle, digs him in the ribs. LORING comes next and pauses to regard WOODHOUSE with scorn ; whereupon, in a fright, WOODHOUSE puts his hands protectingly to his cheeks.*

DULCIE.

[*To LORING, coaxingly.*] No, not to-day, Hughie.

[*Sniffing at WOODHOUSE, she pushes LORING before her and they go out, followed by STULKELEY.*]

WOODHOUSE.

[*As the door closes.*] Vulgar crew! Vulgar crew! Devil take 'em!

JOSEPHA.

[*Coming to him.*] Oh, Mr. Woodhouse, it's out!

WOODHOUSE.

So I conclude. Devil take 'em!

JOSEPHA.

Mr. Panmure has confessed everything.

WOODHOUSE.

Glad of it. Nasty slap for your saintly friend.
[*Crossing to the fireplace.*] To dare to address me in those terms! If a man presumed to speak to me like that, I—I—I'd write him *such* a letter.

JOSEPHA.

[*Sitting upon the settee on the left.*] Poor Lottie Oh, poor Lottie!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Composing himself.*] Anyhow, my dear Miss Quarendon, I did my best to avert the ugly disclosure.

JOSEPHA.

[*Gratefully.*] Ah, yes; it was tremendously noble of you.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Grandly.*] No; [*advancing*] because—I admit it—the act was not wholly a disinterested one on my part. [*Halting in the middle of the room.*] Josepha—Josey—even then the seed which has since blossomed into a flower had begun to germinate in my breast.

JOSEPHA.

[*With a sickly expression.*] Oh!

WOODHOUSE.

Yes, as you have doubtless already gathered from another source, I love you.

JOSEPHA.

[*Wearily.*] Mr. Stulkeley *has* mentioned——

WOODHOUSE.

He was bound in honour to do so. [*Coming nearer.*] Josey, I am not blind to the fact that a paltry secretaryship, a settled income of barely twelve-hundred-a-year, and the possession of a few rubber shares—for the moment less elastic than you would infer from the nature of the substance they represent—I am not, I say, blind to the fact that my financial position compares unfavourably with my cousin Reggie's. On the other hand——

JOSEPHA.

[*Raising her eyes, appealingly.*] Oh, *must* you?

WOODHOUSE.

On the other hand, I have the advantage of youth, a taste for literature and the arts, the power—developed to a remarkable pitch—of playing by ear the current popular melodies on the piano, and the reputation—not, if I may say so, ill-deserved—of being an amusing *raconteur*. The two latter qualifications have gained for me a considerable place in what survives in this country of refined society; and I cannot but think that, with a wife endowed, in a measure, with modest but attractive gifts similar to my own—[*noticing that she is observing him with a twitching face*] eh? [*Inquiringly.*] Did you—? [*She covers her mouth with her handkerchief convulsively.*] What——?

JOSEPHA.

[*Her shoulders heaving.*] Oh! Oh! Oh!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Alarmed.*] My dear Josey!

JOSEPHA.

Ho, ho, ho!

WOODHOUSE.

Darling!

JOSEPHA.

Oh! Oh! Oh, how funny you look!

WOODHOUSE.

Funny!

JOSEPHA.

[*Rising.*] Ho, ho, ho! [*Pointing at him.*] That dam Wallsend!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Laughing constrainedly.*] Ha, ha ! Ha, ha !

JOSEPHA.

Ha, ha, ha !

[*They join hands and are laughing together in their different moods when STULKELEY returns.*]

STULKELEY.

[*Indignantly.*] Talbot ! [JOSEPHA and WOODHOUSE separate and STULKELEY comes between them.] What are you doing !

WOODHOUSE.

Go away, Reggie.

STULKELEY.

Go away ! My dear fellow, I've not nearly finished with Miss Quarendon.

WOODHOUSE.

I can't help it. [*Referring to his watch.*] You have had twenty-three minutes, to a second.

STULKELEY.

That troublesome Mrs. Panmure——

WOODHOUSE.

No fault of mine. I must beg you to leave the room.

STULKELEY.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] Miss Quarendon——

WOODHOUSE.

[*To STULKELEY.*] You had at least *ten* minutes before the Panmure tribe arrived.

STULKELEY.

[*To JOSEPHA.*] I appeal to *you*——

WOODHOUSE.

Any man who can't propose to a lady in ten minutes——

STULKELEY.

[*Taking JOSEPHA'S left hand.*] Josepha——

WOODHOUSE.

[*Taking her right hand.*] Josey——

[*She releases herself laughingly and retreats to the back of the room.*

STULKELEY.

[*To WOODHOUSE.*] Upon my word, Talbot!

WOODHOUSE.

Really, my dear Reggie!

STULKELEY.

[*Sitting upon the settee on the left.*] I remain.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Also sitting upon the settee.*] And I. [*Finding himself beside STULKELEY, he rises and reseats himself in the chair farthest from the end of the settee.*] I remain.

[*There is a pause and then JOSEPHA turns slowly and comes forward.*

JOSEPHA.

[*Thoughtfully.*] Mr. Stulkeley—(STULKELEY rises.)
—Mr. Woodhouse—[WOODHOUSE jumps up. *She looks at them sweetly*] boys, as Mr. Panmure calls you
—you've both been awfully kind to me.

STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE.

[*In acknowledgment.*] Oh——!

JOSEPHA.

[*Her hand to her brow.*] And it's difficult, isn't it—
without saying No to the two of you——?

STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE.

[*Moving a step towards her.*] Ah——!

JOSEPHA.

It's difficult to decide *what* answer to make. [*After another pause, abruptly.*] Look here! [*Again they take a step towards her. She faces them deliberately.*]
Draw lots for me.

STULKELEY.

My dear Miss Quarendon!

WOODHOUSE.

My dear young lady!

JOSEPHA.

Why, you've already drawn lots for the privilege
of being first to propose. [*To WOODHOUSE.*] Mr.
Stulkeley told me so, Mr. Woodhouse.

WOODHOUSE.
Shameful breach of confidence.

STULKELEY.
[*To* WOODHOUSE.] Talbot!

JOSEPHA.
So why hesitate to go a step further?

STULKELEY.
[*Agitatedly.*] No, no, no; impossible!

JOSEPHA.
Why?

WOODHOUSE.
[*Crossing to the fireplace.*] I couldn't; I couldn't.

JOSEPHA.
Why not?

WOODHOUSE.
Most unseemly.

STULKELEY.
[*Pacing the room on the left.*] *Most* unseemly.

WOODHOUSE.
[*Facing* JOSEPHA.] Not only is it unseemly, but—
but—but—but I might lose again!

STULKELEY.
Or I. [*Firmly.*] No. No, no.

WOODHOUSE.
[*Shaking his head.*] No. No, no, no.

JOSEPHA.

[*Shrugging her shoulders.*] Well, as you please![*She darts to the door, and they after her.*]

STULKELEY.

[*Preventing her from opening the door.*] Joseph—!

WOODHOUSE.

Josey——!

JOSEPHA.

[*Looking from one to the other.*] Shall I prepare the bits of paper? [The men hold their heads and groan.] Shall I?

STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE.

[*Helplessly.*] Oh! Oh!

JOSEPHA.

Ha, ha, ha! [She runs to the writing-table and, seating herself there, tears two strips from a sheet of paper.] The vase!

[WOODHOUSE brings the vase from the cabinet at the back, STULKELEY the vase from the console-table, and the two men meet in the middle of the room.]

WOODHOUSE.

[*Pointing to the vase which STULKELEY is carrying, with great indignation.*] Reggie——!

STULKELEY.

My dear fellow, so it is! [Hastily replacing the vase upon the console-table.] I sincerely beg your pardon.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Following STULKELEY.*] Did you select that accursed jar designedly?

STULKELEY.

[*Coming to WOODHOUSE.*] I swear to you, my dear Talbot——!

WOODHOUSE.

Singular forgetfulness!

STULKELEY.

[*Taking WOODHOUSE'S vase from him.*] Try it. [WOODHOUSE cautiously inserts his hand in the vase.] Do, pray, be careful.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Several times repeating the process of dipping his hand into the vase—coldly.*] Thank you for your courtesy.

JOSEPHIA.

[*Who, glancing more than once over her shoulder at the men, has written upon the slips of paper and hurriedly folded them.*] Vase!

[STULKELEY carries the vase to JOSEPHIA while WOODHOUSE, with a look of resolve, turns up his shirt-cuff. JOSEPHIA rises and drops the pieces of paper singly into the vase.]

STULKELEY.

[*To JOSEPHIA.*] What have you written?

WOODHOUSE.

[*To JOSEPHIA.*] What have you written?

JOSEPHA.

[*Faintly.*] "Lucky man."

STULKELEY.

"Lucky man"!

WOODHOUSE.

"Lucky man"!

STULKELEY.

[*Quaking.*] "Lucky man" wins you?

WOODHOUSE.

[*Excitably.*] "Lucky man" wins you?

JOSEPHA.

[*Almost inaudibly, nodding.*] Yes.

STULKELEY and WOODHOUSE.

[*Drawing a deep breath.*] Ah-h-h-h!

JOSEPHA.

[*Taking the vase from STULKELEY tremblingly.*] I'll hold the vase. [STULKELEY is pulling up his coat-sleeve when WOODHOUSE presses forward and is about to thrust his hand into the vase.] Ah, no!

WOODHOUSE.

No?

JOSEPHA.

N-no-no; M-M-Mr. Stulkeley d-draws first.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Stiffly.*] By all means. [*Retiring to the further side of the writing-table.*] I yield to my cousin's decided seniority.

[*Controlling himself with difficulty, STULKELEY dips his hand into the vase and extracts one of the slips of paper.*]

STULKELEY.

[*Unfolding it with quivering fingers.*] I—I can't—!
It—it won't—! [*Uttering a cry.*] Ah!

WOODHOUSE.

What——?

STULKELEY.

“Lucky man”!

WOODHOUSE.

Dash!

[WOODHOUSE *walks about furiously.* JOSEPHA
places the vase upon the writing-table and,
sinking upon the fauteuil-stool, covers her
face with her hands.

STULKELEY.

[*Unsteadily.*] Lucky man! [*Sitting upon the settee*
on the left, overcome by emotion.] Lucky man!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Regaining his composure—to STULKELEY.*] Well, I
—ha!—I offer you my warm felicitations, my dear
Reggie.

STULKELEY.

[*Sympathetically.*] Oh, my dear Talbot!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Finding himself at the writing-table again and*
putting his hand into the vase mechanically.] Felicita-
tions which I hope Miss Quarendon will not disdain
to share.

JOSEPHA.

[*Whimpering.*] Oh! Oh!

WOODHOUSE.

As for me—without wishing to disturb your hap-

piness—[*drawing out the second piece of paper and unfolding it unconsciously*] as for me, my life, my career, are as blank—as blank as this——

[*He breaks off, staring at the paper. Raising her head, and turning it quickly, JOSEPHA realises what has happened and, with a gasp, starts up and rushes at WOODHOUSE.*

JOSEPHA.

Ah, no! Don't! You mustn't! [*Seeing that she is too late.*] Oh!

WOODHOUSE.

“Lucky man”! [*STULKELEY rises, appalled. WOODHOUSE looks at JOSEPHA.*] “L-l-lucky man”?

JOSEPHA.

[*Her chin on her breast.*] Yes, but ——

WOODHOUSE.

But——?

JOSEPHA.

[*With a motion of her head towards STULKELEY.*] He—he drew it first.

WOODHOUSE.

[*After a pause.*] I—I understand.

[*STULKELEY goes quietly to JOSEPHA, touches her arm, and then retires to the back.*

JOSEPHA.

[*Moving away from WOODHOUSE, crying.*] Ho, ho, ho! Oh, Mr. Woodhouse, I d-d-didn't want to wound your feelings by refusing you. I t-t-thought it would make it easier for you if you believed you had lost me by chance. [*Turning to WOODHOUSE, who has followed*

her, and taking his hand.] Forgive me. [*He sighs heavily.*] Who knows! Perhaps, after all, the real lucky man is the man I *don't* marry.

WOODHOUSE.

[*In a gloomy voice.*] A quibble.

JOSEPHIA.

[*Pressing his hand to her heart.*] Yes, forgive me and forget me. Go abroad for a time—be a great traveller—a discoverer——!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Withdrawing his hand.*] Ha! How easy it is to talk! [*Bitterly.*] The only spot on earth *left* to be discovered is the end of the Cromwell Road.

[*He leaves her, and she sits at the writing-table and, with her elbows upon it, leans her head upon her hands.*]

JOSEPHIA.

[*Dejectedly.*] Oh! Oh!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Pausing, on his way to the door, at the table on the left, and addressing STULKELEY who is now at the fire-place.*] Reggie, I fancied I detected you, a little while ago, in an attempt to purloin my latch-key.

[*He produces his key-ring and detaches a key from it.*]

STULKELEY.

[*Hurrying to him.*] My dear fellow!

WOODHOUSE.

[*Laying the key upon the table.*] There it is.

STULKELEY.

I insist on your retaining it.

WOODHOUSE.

[*Going to the door, haughtily.*] No.

STULKELEY.

Talbot——!

WOODHOUSE.

No.

STULKELEY.

I entreat!

WOODHOUSE.

No. No, no. [*His hand on the door-handle.*] Besides, I have a duplicate. [*He departs, closing the door.*]

STULKELEY.

[*Turning to* JOSEPHA *with outstretched arms.*] Josepha——!

[*She rises and goes to him and he, putting his arms about her, kisses her rapturously.*]

JOSEPHA.

[*Releasing herself and, with a pout, drawing her hand across her lips.*] Oh, men will kiss me!

[*The door is thrown open and* MISS STULKELEY, *in her outdoor things, enters excitedly.*]

MISS STULKELEY.

[*Panting.*] Tell me! Which is it? [*To* JOSEPHA.] Josepha! [*JOSEPHA advances to her.*] Talbot or Reginald?

JOSEPHA.

[*Dropping her head upon* MISS STULKELEY'S *bosom.*] I—I—I suppose it's Reginald.

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